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Wordsworth, Wesley, Hazlitt, and the Embarrassment of
Enthusiasm

by

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Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis addresses an area which has been neglected within the predominantly secular emphasis of post nineteenth-century Romantic scholarship: the impact of religious revivalism on literary Romanticism. It argues that the affective culture of Methodist evangelism actually anticipated literary Romanticism in its commitment to a religion and a language 'of the heart'. My study considers the stylistic and ideological affinity between some Methodist and 'Romantic' writing from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth-century, with specific reference to the culture of 'enthusiasm'. I explain how enthusiasm is identified with both religious and creative inspiration, but consider the problematic implications of this association. The problem is centred in enthusiasm's historical identification with religious fanaticism, and thus with subversive challenge and excess. My thesis discusses the acute embarrassment which this association generated for the Wesleyan Methodist leadership, and for some prominent Romantic writers. I consider how this embarrassment was manifested, within a literary context, in strenuous efforts to distinguish a respectable, genuine inspiration from its dangerous or spurious equivalent. I argue that the ambivalent feelings aroused by religious enthusiasm reflect a persistent discomfort with its plebeian and feminine associations. My study explores the various stylistic strategies employed by John and Charles Wesley, William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt, to distance themselves from vulgar and insincere religious zeal while remaining committed to the affective precepts which inspired their work and writing. This involves examining affinities in the literary theory and practice of John Wesley and Wordsworth, and Hazlitt's implicit distinction between 'gusto' and enthusiasm. I provide an analytical balance between the production and reception of key texts, including Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Excursion*. Close stylistic analysis demonstrates how the writers' language reveals contradictory allegiances to rational precepts and the ardent impulses of a 'religious' inspiration.

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Introduction

In a review for *The Quarterly* in 1814, Charles Lamb describes the spirit which inspired the moral philosophy of Wordsworth's poem *The Excursion* as an 'expanded and generous Quakerism'. Although this is framed as a tribute, Lamb, in the same review, acknowledges that readers might object to the 'appearance' in the poem 'of a kind of "Natural Methodism"'.¹ Lamb's discussion of the poem's religious sensibility indirectly associates the independent creeds of Quakerism and Methodism, but registers the way in which the latter was often negatively distinguished from the former, more established sect. Lamb's critical caveat reflects a concern about the way in which Methodist tendencies might be publicly perceived.

There is evidence that Lamb's apparent criticism was a distortion of his real opinion, however, and more indicative of the concern of the editor of *The Quarterly*, William Gifford, who would appear to have excised much of Lamb's discussion of the poem's Methodist attributes. In a letter written to Wordsworth in early January 1815, Lamb expressed his frustration at Gifford's distorting deletions. Although the reader no longer has access to the original draft of his review, Lamb insisted that the review, with its comparative references to Methodism, had been designed as a compliment to the poet. 'I am sure you would have been pleased with it', he assured Wordsworth, adding with a slightly obsequious emphasis, 'for I have been feeding my fancy for

¹ Charles Lamb, [Review] *The Excursion; a Poem*, *The Quarterly Review* (Oct. 1814 & Jan. 1815), 101-111 (p. 106).

some months with the intention of pleasing you'.² Lamb's need to give a positive gloss to his interpretation of Wordsworth's poem suggests that the 'Methodist' label was potentially contentious, provoking embarrassment and necessitating a defence.³

Francis Jeffrey, editor of the influential *Edinburgh Review*, was less equivocal about what he also saw as *The Excursion*'s Methodist characteristics, dismissing the style and sentiment of the poem as 'the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit'.⁴ In an earlier review of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, Jeffrey had applied to the 'Lake School' of Wordsworth and his Cumbria-based literary contemporaries Southey and Coleridge, the derisory label, a 'sect' of 'Dissenters'.⁵ In his review of poet and engraver William Blake's Illustrations to Robert Blair's *The Grave* in 1805, *Examiner* reviewer Robert Hunt derided the sensual extravagance of Blake's visionary imagination in terms which echo his brother Leigh Hunt's denunciation of Methodist excesses in the *Examiner* in the same year.⁶

This recurrent use of the 'Methodist' label for the work of various Romantic writers invites us to consider the basis for the comparison and explore the contradictory sentiments it expresses. In the eighteenth-century and

² Charles Lamb to William Wordsworth, January 7, 1815, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, III, 1809-1817, ed. by Edwin W. Marrs, Jr (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 129-130.

³ In direct quotation from Lamb's review, *The Monthly Review* also expressed discomfort with Lamb's positive allusions to Quakerism and Methodism in Wordsworth's *Excursion*. 'Without deciding whether his effusions be such as to stamp on the opinions and sentiments which are found in an "expanded Quakerism" or "Natural Methodism"', remarked the reviewer tartly, 'we will venture to suggest that neither mysticism nor enthusiasm is the best conductor of misguided mortals back to the precincts of a calm and rational reason' (1814), pp. 132-3.

⁴ Francis Jeffrey, [Review] *The Excursion*, a Poem. By William Wordsworth, *The Edinburgh Review* (Nov. 1814), 24, pp. 234-268 (p. 238).

⁵ Jeffrey [Review] *Thalaba The Destroyer*, a Metrical Romance. By Robert Southey, *The Edinburgh Review*, 1 (October 1802), pp.63-83 (p. 63).

⁶ Robert Hunt, Review of William Blake's exhibition of illustrations to *Blair's Grave*, *The Examiner* 1809; Leigh Hunt, *An Attempt to show the Folly and Danger of Methodism, On the Indecencies and Profane Raptures of Methodism*, *The Examiner* (1809).

the earlier decades of the nineteenth century in England, 'Methodist' was far more often a term of abuse than praise.⁷ The identification of Romantic literature with Methodism reflected a negative perception of a shared predisposition. This identification, I suggest, was based on the perception of a common tendency toward 'enthusiasm'. However, this term could also be interpreted more positively, within religious and creative contexts, as the inspirational stimulus of heightened feeling and its spontaneously fluent expression. For John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, positive enthusiasm denoted the religion and language 'of the heart', a concept endorsed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who declared: 'either Christian faith is what Wesley (here) describes, or there is no proper meaning in the word'.⁸ The cultural origins of 'enthusiasm' and the connotations it consequently accrued remained contentious, however.⁹ This thesis attempts to explore *why* enthusiasm as ideological stance and expressive mode represented a locus of contention, and why Romanticism and Methodism's common association with enthusiasm was therefore perceived to be a problem.

I shall attempt to identify the characteristics of Methodist enthusiasm which were negatively applied to some Romantic writings. My study will take the form of a comparative analysis of some eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romantic and Methodist discourse from within the culture of eighteenth-century Wesleyan Methodism and also from 'Romantic' literature produced in

⁷ This is acknowledged by Elizabeth Elbourne in *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity, 1799 – 1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. 31. See also Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd edn (London: Epworth Press 2002), p. 275, and *Methodism Mocked*, Albert M. Lyles (London: Epworth Press, 1960), p. 21 and others.

⁸ Coleridge, marginal annotation to Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley and Rise and Progress of Methodism*, II, 3rd edn (London, 1846), p. 82.

⁹ As Jasper Cragwall, for example, discusses in 'The Shelleys' Enthusiasm', *Huntington Library Quarterly* (December 2005), 631-654.

the last decade of the eighteenth to the second decade of the nineteenth centuries. Although I shall examine examples of lyrical Romantic writing, my selections will not be confined to poetry; this will be considered alongside samples of discursive prose by Coleridge and William Hazlitt, from the same period. All texts will be read within the cultural framework of evangelism for the degree to which they reflect concerns about, or exhibit the characteristics of, religious enthusiasm. I shall attempt to position the textual analysis within a roughly chronological structure to demonstrate the historical and cultural continuity of the problematic discourse of enthusiasm, and, in the process, achieve some narrative cohesion. The discussion in each chapter will centre on texts which I consider to be representative of the creative and critical dimensions of this discourse. This will involve examining both the literal discourse *of*, and the discourse *surrounding* enthusiasm.¹⁰ Since the two were interconnected, I shall consider the actual discourse of enthusiasm and the critical discourse that it generated by analysing texts within the context of their critical reception.

For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing on the writings of those who seem to me to best demonstrate an ambivalent relationship with the concept of enthusiasm. Within Methodism, this ambivalence is best illustrated by a study of the discursive writings of John Wesley who declared his allegiance to a religion of the heart while disassociating himself from false enthusiasm and asserting the rational inspiration of the emotionally charged *Hymns*. Wesley could himself be seen to exemplify the contradictions at the heart of the discourse about enthusiasm. He was difficult to classify

¹⁰ Jon Mee acknowledges the latter in his reference to the discourse *of* as well as the discourse *on* enthusiasm, and the distinction between them, in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 18 and others.

temperamentally, being receptive to some extravagant supernatural claims while sustaining a restrained and rational demeanour. The latter qualities inspired respect, even from erstwhile critics like Robert Southey, who in his conclusion to the second volume of his biography of Wesley, acknowledged the Methodist leader's impressive achievements and saintly qualities.¹¹

The study is designed to expose the embarrassment and tension that a commitment to enthusiasm generated and which arose from a felt need to distinguish between a civilised culture of affect and the potentially unstable zeal of popular evangelism. This, I believe, is well illustrated in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Hazlitt which in different ways demonstrate the tension between rationalist theoretical precepts and emotional imperatives. Wordsworth sought to dignify his art by insisting on the need for the rational regulation of 'powerful feeling', Hazlitt by emphasising the rational faculty of 'gusto' as a masculine substitute for the religious fervour identified with a 'feminine' excitability. A discomfort with enthusiasm derives from complex historical associations with political radicalism and religious Dissent, and the relationship of this independent energy and emotionalism with the working classes and with women. A negative association of women with religious enthusiasm is evident in contemporary critiques of Methodism, as I shall explore. The connection is explicitly made by Clement Hawes in *Mania and the Enthusiastic Style*, when he refers to the culture of 'anti-enthusiastic misogyny'.¹² I shall examine the particular embarrassment occasioned by the

¹¹ Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 2 vols (London, 1820), II, 383- 405.

¹² Clement Hawes, *Mania and Enthusiastic Style: The Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 179.

perceived effeminacy of religious enthusiasm and consequent attempts by male advocates of the wisdom of the heart to assert its rational foundation.

The texts I shall discuss have been selected for the *evangelical* tendencies in their theoretical precepts or creative practice, and in several cases, for the critical controversy which they therefore generated. 'Evangelism' essentially denotes the dissemination of religious good news, or the 'gospel'; with relation to Methodist and Romantic literature, I shall be using the term 'evangelical' specifically to denote a religious or moral earnestness and purpose, and the 'emphatic, affective language adopted to communicate this.'¹³ My initial, comparative assessment of the theoretical prefaces of Wesley and Wordsworth is designed to demonstrate the similar moral and aesthetic principles of writers separated by only a few decades. By analysing both critical and creative works, I intend to demonstrate how the precepts of the one influenced the response and practice of the other in a culturally interactive dialogue. This in turn will illustrate the complex and conflicting ideological pressures in a time of political instability and transition.

The comparative nature of my study will also, I feel, help to address an imbalance in scholarship. In contrast with Romantic literature, the written and oral discourse of Methodism has been little examined from a stylistic or literary perspective, partly because of the cultural denigration of its supposed evangelical populism. My analysis of Methodist discourse seeks to redress a failure to fully appreciate the way in which it prefigured the complex relationship with the language and culture of affect in the literature of Romanticism. I would contest, for example, Theresa Berger's assertion that a

¹³ *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1st edn, 1988, 5th edn, 2004), p. 348.

debate about Charles Wesley's relative relationship to Romanticism and Classicism is 'of little value' in a positioning of his corpus, and instead argue that his lyric craft replicates some of the complexities and contradictions in Romantic writing.¹⁴ To support this premise, I shall demonstrate how the regulatory stylistic practices of John and Charles Wesley anticipated the strategies employed in literary Romanticism to both restrain and refine enthusiasm. I hope to demonstrate that both Romanticist and Methodist writings inherited anxieties about enthusiasm which were rooted in the historical and cultural factors outlined below.

The problematic origins and semantics of enthusiasm

'Enthusiasm', as a critical term and concept, originated in the turbulent era of the English Civil War where it was applied to the zealous excesses of Puritan insurrection.¹⁵ From the beginning it was thus identified with civil and religious disobedience. These negative associations underlay the anxieties about Dissenting ideology and expressions of religious zeal that persisted through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. Concerns about enthusiasm that influenced the hostile reception to early Methodism were reiterated as late as the early years of the nineteenth century by Robert Southey in an article for *The Annual Review* in which he declared that 'a worse evil than

¹⁴ See Theresa Berger's discussion in 'Charles Wesley: A Literary Overview', *Charles Wesley, Poet and Theologian*, ed. by S.T. Kimborough, Jr (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1992), pp. 21-29 (p. 25).

¹⁵ Shaun Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 51.

the spread of Methodism can scarcely be apprehended for England'.¹⁶ Hazlitt's essay 'On the Causes of Methodism' (1817) endorsed, albeit in a lighter satirical vein, the views of critic Leigh Hunt in his earlier, declamatory essays for *The Examiner*, published together as: *An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism* (1809). And both of these were repeating the antagonistic sentiments of Jonathan Swift at the beginning of the previous century.¹⁷

The early nineteenth-century debate about enthusiasm nevertheless drew on the more complex cultural history and contradictory etymology of this 'dark, ambiguous word', and responses to the affective precepts with which enthusiasm was identified were diverse.¹⁸ While Hunt and Southey's response maintained a tradition of hostility toward *religious* enthusiasm, those influenced by an eighteenth-century philosophy of moral sensibility honoured the authority of sincere feeling. If Lamb's reference to *The Excursion's* 'Natural Methodism' was indeed designed as a compliment, it is likely to have denoted Wordsworth's emphasis on an internal, emotional conviction of religious and moral truth and its authentication by the poem's natural context.¹⁹ The potential for genuine enthusiasm or polite sensibility to shade into a coarser zeal remained, however, a persistent concern for both critics and advocates of emotional inspiration. The controversy reflected the problematic origins and semantics of 'enthusiasm'.

¹⁶ Southey, 'Periodical Accounts Relative to the Baptist Missionary Society, for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen', *Annual Review*, 2 (1803), pp. 207-18 (p. 213).

¹⁷ Mee, *Romanticism*, p.4.

¹⁸ Wesley, 'On the Nature of Enthusiasm', *Sermons II*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), *The Works of John Wesley*, 24 vols, ed. by F. Baker and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975-84; Nashville, Abingdon, 1984-), II, 46-60 (p. 48).

¹⁹ See Richard Brantley's interpretation of Lamb's Methodist reference in *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (London: Yale University Press 1975), pp. 8, and 174, fn. 23.

Samuel Johnson's dictionary of the English language was produced in the third decade of the Wesleyan ministry in 1755, and its denotations of 'enthusiasm' reflect some of the anxieties and ambivalences which the Methodist movement generated. Although Johnson's definitions are largely pejorative, they reveal a contradictory complexity.²⁰ The first describes enthusiasm as a:

vain belief in private revelation, a vain confidence in divine favour or communication.

Drawing on the seventeenth-century application of the word to a religion of internal revelation, Johnson here defines enthusiasm in a specifically religious sense to denote a self-delusive and deluding mysticism. His repetition of 'vain' emphasises this delusion, and coupled with 'confidence', critically highlights the arrogance of this presumption to divine communion and favour. Where claims to divine insight might, in the days of the early Christian mission, have inspired reverence for the visionary as one divinely blessed, similar claims in the context of enlightenment rationalism provoked suspicion and satire. Contemporary Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, for example, considered enthusiasm to be rooted in 'presumptuous pride and self-confidence'. Hume's moral rationalism was opposed to what he saw as religious extremism and superstition.²¹

Johnson supported his definition with an earlier quotation from John Locke: 'Enthusiasm is founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rises from

²⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London, 1755-6).

²¹ David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (London, 1742-1754), ed. by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), I, 148.

the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain'. This emphasises the self delusive irrationality similarly condemned by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*:

Devotion, when it does not lie under the check of Reason, is very apt to degenerate into Enthusiasm. When the Mind finds her self very much inflamed with her Devotions, she is too much inclined to think they are not of her own kindling but blown up by something Divine within her. If she indulges this thought too far, and humours the growing Passion, she at last flings her self into imaginary Raptures and Exstasies; and when once she fancies her self under the Influence of a Divine Impulse, it is no wonder if she slights Human Ordinances, and refuses to comply with any established Form of Religion.²²

In common with contemporaries Jonathan Swift and John Locke, Addison saw enthusiasm as a corruption of genuine, sober devotion. For these sceptics it signified an inflammation of mind and body indicative both of promiscuity and mental derangement. 'Flings herself' evokes the physical and emotional extravagancies of revivalism which won public notoriety. Addison significantly applies the *feminine* pronoun to a mind seized by visionary delusion. His choice of pronoun reflects a perception of physical and mental abandonment as essentially female, the reverse of masculine sense and stability. In this extreme representation, religious enthusiasm is seen as synonymous with a lack of restraint amounting to hysteria and allied to

²² Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 201, II, p. 289.

madness. It also demonstrates a subversive independence slighting the established authority of 'Human Ordinances'. The weapon of ridicule is used to defuse the dangerous potential of this allegiance to an independent source of authority and inspiration.

The graphic choice of verbs in Johnson's second definition amplifies this sense of emotional excess and intensity:

Heat of imagination; violence of passion; confidence of opinion.

'Heat of imagination' negatively emphasises the incendiary and delusive capacity of the enthusiastic imagination. This view is nevertheless in contrast with the third definition of enthusiasm and the more positive connotations of the nominal abstractions:

Elevation of fancy; exaltation of ideas.

This interpretation positively identifies enthusiasm with creative and intellectual inspiration and echoes an earlier description of the poetic imagination by John Dryden:

Imaging is, in itself, the very height and life of poetry, which, by a kind of enthusiasm, or extraordinary emotion of the Soul, makes it seem to us that we behold those things which the poet paints.²³

²³ John Dryden, *A Parallel Of Poetry and Painting* (1680), Preface to Dryden's translation of Du Fresnoy's *De Arte Graphica* (London, 1695).

Dryden emphasised the brilliant *sensory* illusion which the inspired imagination can produce, but in the language of revivalist revelation: 'extraordinary emotion of the Soul', which conveys the essentially *spiritual* inspiration of this sensory vision. 'Enthusiasm' is here identified with the mystical capacity of the creative imagination to transcend the temporal and material, a view which anticipates the Romantic spiritualising of the Imagination. Equating enthusiasm with spiritual inspiration accords it the power of visionary revelation but with a positively transfiguring impact remote from the dangerous, delusional quality implied in Johnson's 'vain belief in revelation'.

In the early eighteenth-century, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, had made an attempt to refine enthusiasm and cleanse it of its association with vulgarity and fanaticism. In *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm*, Shaftesbury attempted to distinguish between the noble enthusiasm expressed by Dryden and its inferior avatar, but, in contrast with Dryden, who uses the words enthusiasm and inspiration synonymously, he presented the concepts as opposites: 'inspiration is a real feeling of the Divine Presence', he asserted, 'and enthusiasm a false one'.²⁴ While Dryden attempted to elevate this 'enthusiastic' capacity for illusion, Shaftesbury was anxious to make a clear distinction between religiously inflected enthusiasm and a poetic or philosophical inspiration.

In order to clarify the complexities of enthusiasm as a mode of feeling and expression, I identify the aims and practices which unite my chosen figures from the fields of Methodism and literary Romanticism. Within this broader

²⁴ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, 'A Letter concerning Enthusiasm', to My Lord Somers, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London, 1711), I, 44.

comparative structure I shall devote different chapters to considering how individual relationships with enthusiasm were conditioned by temperament and circumstance.

Structure of thesis

In accordance with the broadly chronological frame of this study, I locate the first chapter of this debate about enthusiasm within the biographical and historical context of John Wesley's early mission. I shall supply some opening examples of the enthusiastic pulpit discourse which accompanied and translated this mission, and identify the histrionic characteristics that provoked controversy. I discuss Wesley's engagement with the debate surrounding enthusiasm with particular reference to his Sermon *On the Nature of Enthusiasm* and in his written responses to critics of his own perceived enthusiasm. Chapter 2 goes on to explain how John Wesley's general scruples about enthusiasm were demonstrated in the restraining strategies of his own literary practice and that of his brother Charles, author of the Methodist *Hymns*. The chapter will consider how these strategies exposed tensions that were rooted in the Wesley brothers' different responses to the communicative challenges of a religion of the heart.

I make the thematic and cultural transition to literary Romanticism in Chapter 3 by describing, within a biographical context, William Wordsworth's early exposure to the cultural influence of Methodism and suggest how it might have shaped his outlook and creative method. Maintaining this focus, Chapter 4 will supply further evidence for the similar moral and aesthetic precepts of

John Wesley and Wordsworth in a comparative analysis of each of their prefaces to seminal works within the cultures of Methodism and Romanticism: John Wesley's 'Preface' to the *Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, and Wordsworth's 'Preface' and 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' which were appended to *The Lyrical Ballads*.

This will be followed in Chapter 5 by an analysis of Wordsworth's poetic expression of the theory that he had retrospectively formalised. This will involve a close examination of Wordsworth's reproduction of the voice of ordinary experience in the *Lyrical Ballads*. I shall discuss the embarrassment generated by this 'common' discourse amongst both the author and his critics and consider how this response reflected an educated distaste for the plebian voice of popular evangelism. The discussion serves to illustrate how the embarrassment of enthusiasm is evident in, and sustained by, the dialogue between the production and reception of a text. This critical dialogue is further developed in Chapter 6 which examines the controversy generated by the religious enthusiasm of Wordsworth's more overtly moralistic long poem, *The Excursion*, and considers the ambivalent responses of Francis Jeffrey and Wordsworth himself to its incipient evangelism. I discuss Wordsworth's contentious use of Methodism as a narrative vehicle in his poem *Peter Bell*. I shall address the relevance of pedestrianism within each poem to the potentially subversive itinerancy of Methodist evangelism.

The critical direction of this discussion leads to a study, in Chapters 7 and 8, of some of the discursive writings of William Hazlitt who engaged personally and critically with the vision and art of Wordsworth and Coleridge. I shall further develop the sense of enthusiasm as a source of controversy and

embarrassment by examining Hazlitt's advocacy of 'gusto' and the way that this attribute is implicitly distinguished from the emotive and feminine connotations of religious enthusiasm. This will involve assessing Hazlitt's allegiances within the biographical context of his upbringing in the culture of Rational Dissent and relating this to the views expressed in his satirical critique of Methodism, 'On the Causes of Methodism'.

Chapter 8 will continue this debate within the context of Hazlitt's changing perception of Wordsworth and Coleridge whom he judged on the basis of their emotional honesty. The discussion will focus on Hazlitt's changing response to the pulpit style of Coleridge's inaugural sermon in the Unitarian church at Taunton, and the written rhetoric of the later *Lay Sermons*, and consider how it reflected a distinction between sincere and spurious enthusiasm concordant with the prevailing critical associations of the term. I hope to make a convincing case for there having been, within the contexts of religious evangelism and literary Romanticism, a continuum of debate surrounding the issue of enthusiasm. The historical frame of the study also, I hope, illustrates the changing relationship with enthusiasm amongst those whose initial commitment was progressively modified, even compromised by the pressures of cultural conformity and conservatism.

Critical positioning of the debate

While academics have recognised the need to address the contributions made by established and Dissenting religion to the visionary philosophy of Romantic literature, there has been some reluctance to accept that literary Romanticism

may have been in any way influenced by the cultural climate of religious revivalism. My study will therefore address what I consider a neglected area of scholarship. E.P. Thompson, Jon Mee and Clement Hawes amongst others, have remarked on an academic disinclination to identify canonical literary figures like Milton or Blake with plebeian enthusiasms, and a consequent need to position them within a respectable, mainstream literary or religious tradition.²⁵ Although this view might have been largely amended with relation to Blake, the same cannot be said with regard to the appraisal of Wordsworth or William Hazlitt.

It is many decades since the affinity between both the ideology and literary method of Romanticism and Wesleyan Methodism has been accorded serious attention, the most extended comparative studies dating back to Frederick Gill's pioneering *The Romantic Movement and Methodism* and T.B. Shepherd's *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century*.²⁶ This investigation aims to develop a line of enquiry which has to some extent been left suspended in a more secular critical climate less receptive until recently to exploring the relationship between popular evangelism and serious literature.

Frederick Gill emphasised Romanticism and Methodism's common faith in the doctrine of the wisdom of the heart, citing Wesley and Coleridge's celebration of a spirit of enthusiasm which manifested itself both as personal spiritual revelation and communication: 'an internal ecstasy or "fullness", representing the divine "overflowing" by its "communicativeness", "budding

²⁵ E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast, William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and Clement Hawes, *Mania and Literary Style: The Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Frederick C. Gill, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1st edn, 1937, repr. 1954); T.B. Shepherd, *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth Press, 1940).

and blossoming forth in all earnestness of persuasion”'.²⁷ Gill was not, however, concerned to explore the more contentious nature of this discourse. Richard Brantley's later study of *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* in 1975 made an emphatic claim for the spiritual and stylistic affinity of Wordsworthian and contemporary evangelical discourse.²⁸ His thesis is supported with reference to those who, like Archdeacon William Hutton, observed that, 'the age of Wesley and Whitfield introduced what may be called a new romanticism in religion, just as the Lake School, half a century later, may be said to have destroyed the classic tradition of the older poetry.'²⁹ Brantley also notes how E.H. Sugden, early editor of Wesley's *Sermons*, drew a parallel between the internal emphasis of Wordsworth and Wesley's visionary inspiration. He saw their common emphasis on the 'indwelling spirit of God' as helping to refine 'enthusiasm', and, in Brantley's words, 'establish an honorific sense for the pejorative term'.³⁰

However, even Brantley seems anxious to disassociate Romantic writers from 'enthusiasm'. In the Postscript to his *Locke, Wesley and the Method of English Romanticism*, he states his view that English Romanticism's 'religious passion' should be acknowledged, but insists that it is nevertheless 'not "demonic"', since it is 'sufficiently commensurable with intellectual criteria to be less than enthusiastic'.³¹ Enthusiasm is here clearly seen as something distinct from rationalism and, by implication, is a label which would degrade

²⁷ Gill, *Romantic Movement and Methodism*, p. 175.

²⁸ Richard Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (London: Yale University Press, 1975).

²⁹ Archdeacon William H. Hutton, *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), cited in Brantley, *Natural Methodism*, p. 176, fn. 28.

³⁰ Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, p. 72 and 176, fn. 28, citing Edward H. Sugden, ed., *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, 2 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 2, 343-44 n.

³¹ Brantley, *Locke, Wesley and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984), p. 206.

the authority of what Brantley has acknowledged to be a spiritually inspired English Romanticism.

Shaun Irlam's more recent study *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm* would concur with Sugden's earlier contention that authoritative cultural figures such as Wordsworth helped to establish an 'honorific' sense for enthusiasm. Irlam develops the view that the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility served to cleanse enthusiasm of pejorative religious associations by through its 'transformation into secular, literary affect'.³² I would certainly agree that this was the aim of certain Romantic writers, but contest the view that enthusiasm was as easily assimilated and civilised as Irlam's confident premise allows.³³ I would maintain that enthusiasm remained a locus of debate that reflected an uncertain and contradictory relationship with the evangelical tendencies it continued to enshrine.

Richard Brantley and Wordsworth scholars William Ulmer and Robert Ryan have remarked on the predominantly secular and political emphasis of much twentieth-century Romantic scholarship and the general reluctance to acknowledge the influence of denominational, and particularly evangelical, religion on the poetic vision and style of such Romantic writers as Wordsworth.³⁴ Although Francis Jeffrey had explicitly identified the language of Wordsworth's *Excursion* with the rhetoric of Methodism, he admitted that he would have difficulty defining the specific 'creed' of the dissenting Lake School. Revisionary investigation into the religious dimension of

³² Irlam, *Elations*, p. 236.

³³ The basic argument of Mee's *Romanticism* challenges Irlam's claim.

³⁴ Brantley asserts, for example, on page 13 of *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* that 'Biographers have helped to create the assumption that Wordsworth was skeptical towards matters of faith and doctrine'. Robert Ryan argues that scholars have underestimated the cultural influence of the evangelical revival on literary Romanticism in the period under discussion in his Introduction to *The Romantic Reformation, Religious Politics in English Literature 1789-1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-12.

Wordsworth's poetry has attempted to measure its expression of religious belief, whether conformist or independent, against conventional Christian doctrine. Wordsworth has thus been placed at the various stages of his career within the denominational framework of Rational Dissent, Evangelical Anglicanism or Tory High Anglicanism.³⁵ William Ulmer, for example, argues that the combination of Romantic spirituality and Christian tradition in Wordsworth's poetry 'places (their) religious outlook in irreducibly metaphorical relation to institutional Christianity', suggesting that (some) Romantic poetry figuratively embodies an orthodox religious perception.³⁶ The relationship of Romanticism to the culture of religious enthusiasm may have been explored in Ryan's *Romantic Reformation* and to a much fuller extent, in Jon Mee's influential studies, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, and *Enthusiasm, Romanticism and Regulation*, but the relationship between literary Romanticism and Methodism specifically has not been fully explored since Gill and Shepherd's studies, while affinities in Wordsworth and John Wesley's stylistic practice and theory have been little examined.³⁷ The influence of this cultural legacy on William Hazlitt's complex relationship to Wordsworth and Coleridge has also been ignored.

As already suggested, comparatively little attention has been paid to the actual language of religious enthusiasm, its character, influence and reception, within the contexts of Methodist culture and literary Romanticism. An example is Albert Lyles' early assertion, in *Methodism Mocked* (1940), that religious enthusiasm in the eighteenth century was 'more a matter of doctrine than of the

³⁵ Richard Brantley attributes Wordsworth's spiritual imagination to the influence of an Evangelical Anglicanism absorbed from the poet's student years in Cambridge.

³⁶ William Ulmer *The Christian Wordsworth, 1798-1805* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 181

³⁷ Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*.

manner in which the doctrine was presented', an assumption which ignores the intimate relationship of the two. George Lawton supplied a more detailed analysis of John Wesley's language in *John Wesley's English* in 1962, but in 1999, Jean-Pierre van Noppen felt the need to address what he still considered a little examined area. His study, *Transforming Words*, emphasises the need for a closer attention to Methodist linguistics for the insight that it can provide into a speaker's principles and temperament. This is a view endorsed by John Kinnaird from the perspective of Romantic studies. In the conclusion to his study of *Hazlitt: Critic of Power*, Kinnaird suggests that close textual attention to Hazlitt's writings could yield evidence of the religious sensibilities which much modern Hazlitt scholarship has perhaps been too ready to disregard.³⁸ These considerations have prompted the stylistic emphasis of this study. The focus also seems appropriate for an analysis of the innately communicative attribute of 'enthusiasm' which, in its religious origins, is closely identified with The Word.

A seminal conference at Oxford University in July 2000: *Religion and Romantic (Re)Vision, 1780-1830*, followed by others across Britain, attempted to address the way that the secular cast of much twentieth century Romantic scholarship has been inclined to underestimate the influence of religion on the moral philosophy, visionary imagination and discursive practices of Romantic writers. Specialists in the field of Romantic studies contributed papers which illuminated our understanding of this creative, complex, and sometimes contentious relationship between literary Romanticism and religious

³⁸ Albert Lyles, *Methodism Mocked* (London: Epworth Press, 1940), p. 44; George Lawton, *John Wesley's English* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962); Jean-Pierre van Noppen, *Transforming Words: The Early Methodist Revival from a Discourse Perspective* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 9; John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt, Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 344.

philosophy.³⁹ This public forum has opened the door to further fruitful investigation into perhaps unexpected connections and allegiances.

Conclusion

In the following chapters, I shall therefore develop further what I consider the significant connection between Romantic literature and Methodist evangelism, and explore how this connection was manifested in a simultaneous empathy with, and resistance to, the discourse of religious enthusiasm. I shall examine the embarrassment which this relationship generated for the literary and religious 'revivalists' who subscribed to a religion or language of the heart in a critical climate shaped by the precepts of enlightenment rationalism. Since my study is designed to show how the evangelical principles of Methodism fed progressively into the literary practice of Romanticism, it seems appropriate to open the narrative by outlining the Wesleyan debate about enthusiasm. This will be illustrated with particular reference, amongst other texts, to the sermon which John Wesley wrote to distinguish between a sincere passion and the vulgar enthusiasm with which his movement was, he believed, damagingly identified.

³⁹ For information on the themes of this conference, see *Religion and Romantic (Re)Vision* — 'A Special Issue of Romanticism on the Net', 25, 2002.

Chapter 1

John Wesley's mission: steering a course between sound and spurious enthusiasm

In 1762 William Hogarth produced a caricature of enthusiastic devotion in a Methodist meeting house. Entitled *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism*, the print depicts a histrionic preacher addressing listeners in various stages of ecstatic abandonment.¹ The implied culprits are the authors of the literature shown lying about the meeting house, the writings of George Whitefield and John Wesley, evangelists of revivalism. The lecherous expressions and amorous fondlings of couples in the foreground illustrate the way in which Methodism was seen to inflame carnal desire through delusions of divine favour in the instantaneous conversion experience of the 'New Birth'.

Irreverent, exaggerated representations of eighteenth-century Methodism were provoked by an affective theology disseminated through the popular pulpit, printed testimony and the journals of its leaders. Hogarth's caricature was verbally replicated in the literary satire which Methodist enthusiasm also inspired. The theatricality of the Methodist preaching style was a favourite subject of parody:

In *holy Go-Carts* there, by *due Degrees*,

¹ William Hogarth, *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* (London: Heath, 1762). See Appendix, p. 332.

They're taught to *snivel, groan, cant, whine, and wheeze,*
Heart-melting Tones of wheedling Intercession,
Boangery, on Mobs to make Impression;
Stage-tricks, to fill the gloomy Soul with *Fear,*
And wring from *Guilt a Shilling, and a Tear.*²

Such satires specifically attacked what was perceived as the calculated histrionics and emotional manipulation of Methodist enthusiasm.

John Downes, Rector of St. Michael, Ward Street, believed that Methodists could be identified purely by their theatrical pulpit style. He urged vigilance against preachers displaying such characteristics as pretenders who must be barred from the respectable pulpit.

Sometimes a preacher unhappily incurs it by his Voice, Manner, Gestures, Pronunciation, nay, even by his very Countenance – Sometimes by the Pathos of his Stile, and the Vehemency of his address.[...] But then sometimes again, he brings it upon himself; as by heaping Scripture upon Scripture, either foreign to his Subject, or unconnected with his Matter; by a studied and more frequent Repetition, or hackneyed use of the adorable name of Jesus, than is either prudent or decent; by being fond of rapturous expressions, and high Flights of Piety, soaring quite beyond the Regions of reason and Common Sense.³

² *The Fanatic Saints* (1778), quoted in Lyles, *Methodism Mocked*, p. 74.

³ John Downes, *Methodism Examined and Disposed* (London, 1759).

An enthusiastic style was felt to lack the proportion, restraint and rational focus which observed the tenets of polite taste.

Eighteenth-century Anglican vicar, Richard Graves, found material and language for fictional satire in the journals of Methodists. In his affectionate parody of Methodism, *The Spiritual Quixote*, he adapted a 1740 journal entry by John Wesley and combined it with material from a 1739 entry from the Journals of George Whitefield.⁴ Like Wesley in the original source, the novel's itinerant Methodist hero, Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose, stirs the emotions of his listeners at a Methodist Society meeting. As in Wesley's entry, Wildgoose's sleep is later disturbed by:

A number of people (who) had worked themselves up to such a pitch of religious frenzy that they some were fallen prostrate on the floor, screaming and roaring and beating their breasts, in agonies of remorse for their former wicked lives; others were singing hymns, leaping and exulting in ecstasies of joy that their sins were forgiven them.⁵

The emotional and physical excitement provoked by the ecstatic experience of the New Birth – the knowledge of Christ's saving grace - was reflected in the heightened language and dramatic metaphors employed by adherents throughout the history of revivalism. This, for Wesley, was the Extraordinary Call of divine inspiration, as distinct from the 'Ordinary' call of clerical

⁴ August 11th 1740, *Journals II (1738-1743)*, ed. by W. Reginald Ward (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), *Works*, XIX, 164.

Also see discussion in John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 146-151.

⁵ Richard Graves, *The Spiritual Quixote, or The Summer's Ramble of Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose* (1773) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 294.

vocation and purpose.⁶ A letter in the Methodist *Arminian Magazine* related how the ‘power of god in a wonderful manner filled the room and the cries of the distressed instantly broke out like a clap of thunder’.⁷ John Wesley employed a similar rhetoric when he described how, at a disrupted meeting in the Foundery Chapel in London, suddenly, ‘the hammer of the Word brake the rocks (of evil) in pieces’.⁸ His Journal also reproduced a letter which related how, in Limerick, those assured of God’s grace, ‘trembled, cried, prayed and roared aloud, all of them lying on the ground’.⁹ The hyperbolic style of much popular testimony was criticised and ridiculed both for impropriety and inelegance, and generally ascribed to ignorance and credulity.

Equally prevalent was the language of sentiment, gendered as feminine. This discourse also characterised the secular literary culture of sensibility where a fictional heroine might be seen ‘melting with pity for every human woe’.¹⁰ This style is echoed in the language of Whitefield’s journal when he describes how he preached on one occasion to ‘about twelve thousand’ listeners:

I had not spoken long before I perceived numbers melting. As I proceeded, the influence increased till at last (both in the morning and the afternoon) thousands cried out, so that they almost drowned my voice. Never did I see a more glorious sight. Oh what tears were shed and poured out after the

⁶ John to Charles Wesley, June 23rd, 1739, *Letters 1, 1721-1739*, ed. by Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), *Works*, XXV, 660.

⁷ *The Arminian Magazine, A Selection of Letters etc. upon the late Extraordinary Period* (Manchester 1800), pp. 20-21.

⁸ Thurs, Sept. 18th, 1740, *Journals*, II, *Works*, XIX, 169.

⁹ 20 July, 1762, *Journals IV (1755-1765)*, ed. by W. Reginald Ward (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), *Works*, XXI, 380.

¹⁰ Frances Brooke, *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (London, 1763).

Lord Jesus. Some fainted; and when they had got a little strength they would hear and faint again.¹¹

An account of the death of Methodist Jasper Robinson describes the dying man's room 'filled with the glory of God, and their (mourners') hearts were as melting wax, while bowed before him'.¹² This language of 'the heart', a dominant metaphor in evangelical testimony, encouraged the amatory analogies of Hogarth's salacious portrait and other criticisms of the movement's 'feminine' sensuality. For sophisticated observers, and especially those, like the Rev. Graves, anxious to defend establishment practice, the emotional excesses of the Methodist meeting were dryly viewed as 'a species of folly which has frequently disturbed the tranquillity of this nation'.¹³

John Wesley's revivalist mission was dogged by this popular perception of Methodism as synonymous with a manic enthusiasm that offended both sense and decency. As I shall explore in this chapter, much of his time was devoted to defending his movement from such aspersions. Ronald Knox described John Wesley, perhaps too easily, as 'determined not to be an enthusiast', and Hempton refers to 'Wesley's tightrope marches across the ravines of religious enthusiasm'.¹⁴ 'Ravines' nicely expresses the threat posed by any association with enthusiastic excess, though 'marches' conveys a confident assurance which belies the complex ambivalence of Wesley's own relationship with enthusiasm. Certainly the image of a tightrope communicates the tense and

¹¹ May 14th, 1740, *The Journals of George Whitefield*, ed. by Robert Backhouse (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), p.216.

¹² 'Account of the Death of Mr. Jasper Robinson', *The Methodist Magazine for the Year 1798*.

¹³ Graves, *Spiritual Quixote*, 'A Prefatory Anecdote', p. 3.

¹⁴ Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 452; David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New York: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 35.

precarious balancing act which John Wesley's defence of 'heart religion' involved. Wesley attempted to dignify the image of Methodism by distinguishing its passionate, but rationally founded faith from a spurious and self-serving zeal. This was a preoccupation reflected in over two hundred references to 'enthusiasm' in his writings.¹⁵ I shall open my analysis of Wesley's complex relationship with enthusiasm by supplying a brief biographical outline of his foundation and early development of the Methodist movement within the broader historical context of contemporary religious culture.

The origins of John Wesley's Methodism

Born in June 1703, John Wesley was the product of his parents' reunion after a tense period of separation owing to differing political loyalties. His distinctive character could thus be seen as having been forged through a reconciliation of opposites.¹⁶ Wesley came to maturity in an age that exhibited similar contradictions and in which legislative efforts and debate were motivated by a desire for both political and religious stability.¹⁷ Since the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and through the later accession of the Protestant William and Mary in 1688, there had been official toleration of Dissent, though by the eighteenth-century, persistent restrictions on Dissenters' educational and professional opportunities discouraged many from joining the ranks of the Dissenting sects. However, the rational and liberal challenge to the established Church gained momentum from the early part of the century with Calvinist

¹⁵ Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp. 49, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

inspired Presbyterianism critically engaging with doctrines of predestination and the Trinity. In 1774 this would find formal expression in Unitarianism, the creed that was to attract the liberal thinkers of late eighteenth-century literary Romanticism.

John Wesley - and later William Wordsworth – were deeply influenced by the teaching of William Law in his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) which advocated ‘reasonableness’ and ‘duty’ against extremism or didacticism in religious observance. At the same time, Wesley was receptive to the spirit of High Church or Puritan piety which infused Law’s teachings. This spirit was disseminated in prominent Dissenting denominations such as the Presbyterians which persisted into the 1730s and were to become fruitful sources of support for the evangelical revival. From the first half of the eighteenth-century, the earlier austerities of Dissent were also leavened by the emotional inspiration of the hymns of Presbyterian divines Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge who attempted to renew the passion and mystery of religion and through their personal and reflective hymns helped to establish a climate receptive to revivalism.

Although eighteenth-century Methodism gained strength from a perceived deficiency both in the Established Church and its Dissenting offshoots, it arose, as Henry Rack convincingly argues, from a persistent devotional tradition in English religious culture.¹⁸ From the 1730s, this residual Puritan piety found expression in the evangelical initiative which sought to revive an earlier apostolic Christianity. With its emphasis on revealed, supernatural, scriptural religion, Methodist revivalism was in marked contrast to the rationalist bias of

¹⁸ See Rack’s discussion in *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp. 161-170.

contemporary religion and the secular spirit of good sense which characterised mainstream Anglicanism.¹⁹ The moralistic focus of contemporary religion was also challenged by the Revival's central emphasis on the traditional Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith as the only foundation for good works. To some extent Wesley's personal, inward religion drew on a supernatural belief system which amongst the less educated classes persisted into the age of enlightenment. The rational Wesley nevertheless remained receptive to supernatural interpretations of physical seizures and visions claimed by disciples as divine revelation. Although extravagant physical manifestations of the new birth were foreign to Wesley's own equable temperament, he remained fascinated by what they seemed to suggest of the mysterious operations of the spirit, and took them seriously enough to record them in his journal. Throughout his life he would ascribe to providential intervention such events as natural accident, physical recovery from illness or preservation from danger.²⁰

Methodism's simpler evangelical genesis presented a contrast to the critical literacy of Rational Dissenting sects such as Unitarianism. Erik Routley attests that rationalist Dissenting sects like the Quakers and Unitarians 'had little to do with the evangelical revival', although the Unitarians from the last quarter of the eighteenth- century were careful to distinguish their intellectual authority from the 'philanthropic aristocracy' of the Quakers.²¹ However, Wesley's Methodism was distinguished from intellectual and philanthropic sects by its broader accessibility; he had no time for religions that only the intellectually

¹⁹ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 174.

²⁰ See, for example, Wesley's Journal entry, October 20, 1743, amongst many others. See also van Noppen, p. 85.

²¹ Erik Routley, *English Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 142, 151.

sophisticated could grasp. His mission was driven by a commitment to an affective theology that was direct and meaningful to all, but had to be actively and practically implemented. The motifs and narratives which collected round Wesley in the course of his active ministry illustrated the energy of this evangelical outreach and communicative purpose.

Assimilated into Wesleyan mythology is the story of the young John Wesley's rescue from the burning wreckage of his family home. Some time between eleven pm and midnight on 9th February 1709, when John was a child of six, a fire igniting the roof of the corn barn at Samuel Wesley's rectory in Epworth, Lincolnshire, swiftly engulfed the house. John was assumed to have been with the rest of the family evacuated from the burning building, but the crowd gathered outside was alerted by a child's cries and looked up to see John at the window of one of the upper rooms. Someone mounted the building to bring the boy to safety just before the roof collapsed into the chamber. By 1737, Wesley had adopted the Pauline scriptural metaphor of a 'brand from the burning' for his apparently miraculous preservation. Hindsight inevitably heightened the providential significance of this early incident for a man whose serious pursuit of a holy life began soon after his entry to Christ Church, Oxford as an undergraduate in 1720, and, after his ordination in 1725, as an elected fellow of Lincoln College.²² However, the 'brand from the burning', though symbolic of Wesley's trail-blazing missionary purpose, was singed with conflagration. It encapsulated the image of robust survivor and incendiary pioneer contentiously identified with enthusiasm.²³

²² Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 69.

²³ See Roy Hattersley, *A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), p.25 and Rack, p. 57, amongst others.

John Wesley's disciplined piety was reflected in the label of 'Methodists' applied to the members of the 'Holy Club' which his brother Charles and he had established from about 1729 in Christ Church. The zeal of the original Club's members inevitably earned them the title 'Enthusiasts' from other scholars. As Wesley's own devotional practice became more pronounced, so did clerical concerns about a tendency towards dangerous enthusiasm. John's elder brother, Samuel, for example, objected to the label 'The Holy Club' for his brother's band of zealots, considering the name 'really calculated to do mischief: but the charge of enthusiasm could weigh with none but such as drink away their senses, or never had any'.²⁴ The term enthusiasm here is applied as readily to physical as devotional excess which characterised later criticisms of Methodist sensuality. Bishop Butler famously denounced the enthusiasm of George Whitefield's Journals as 'a horrid thing Sir, a very horrid thing'.²⁵ Bishop Benson expressed his undisguised relief at the news that Whitefield had made the decision to pursue his missionary course in Georgia, America, remarking that this was 'a happy destination for one whose fervent spirit was likely to lead him into extravagancies of doctrine as well as of life'.²⁶ John Wesley was more commonly associated with moderation than Whitefield who, in contrast with Wesley's more respectful treatment in Graves's *Spiritual Quixote*, is represented as 'a firebrand and a hypocrite'.²⁷

Commitment to 'enthusiastic' practice and expression is rarely unequivocal, however, even amongst its keenest advocates. Although the methods and mode of Wesleyan Methodism may have seemed to challenge the precepts of formal

²⁴ Samuel to John Wesley, April 28th, 1731, *Letters I, 1721-1739*, ed. by Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1), *Works*, XXV, 278.

²⁵ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 209.

²⁶ Southey, *Life of Wesley*, I, 128

²⁷ Graves, *Spiritual Quixote*, xvi.

Anglicanism, the Wesley brothers maintained their identity as Anglican parsons and their loyalty to its creeds and forms throughout their lives. Henry Rack observes that 'in many ways, John Wesley was not a typical evangelical at all and became less so as he grew older.' Wesley continually declared his allegiance to the established Church and endeavoured to observe its tenets and liturgical practice. In ironic contradiction to the subversive, Dissenting reputation it acquired, Methodism originated within the doctrinal framework of Anglicanism and could be viewed as a popular and mobile evangelistic offshoot of the established church.²⁸ John Wesley had always keenly disliked Dissent and resisted pressures to join its ranks which, in the view of Charles would be to 'go out like the snuff of a candle'.²⁹ Despite the anxieties which the Methodist mission provoked, it has been viewed by a number of modern historians as a socially and politically stabilising influence. David Hempton, for example, suggests that Methodism offered 'a vibrant religious vehicle' for the 'free-born Englishman' and 'disciplined protest' to 'operate outside the confines of the Established Church without seriously destabilising the British state in the era of the French Revolution'.³⁰

John Wesley was inclined to interpret certain Anglican tenets with more liberality than did some of his clerical contemporaries, however. Despite his professed orthodoxy, he focused on a few essential principles of a shared faith while maintaining a tolerant flexibility on other issues. He was to alarm traditionalists such as his brother Samuel when, early in his ministry, he adopted the Dissenting practice of open-air preaching. This practice was

²⁸ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 38.

²⁹ Charles Wesley, Letter to Sellon, Nov. 29th, 1754, in John R. Tyson, *Assist me to proclaim: the life and hymns of Charles Wesley* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), p. 218.

³⁰ Hempton, *Religion of the People*, p. 8.

considered to violate established laws and boundaries and had embroiled Whitefield in a legal challenge that he stoutly refuted on scriptural authority. This field preaching was to exemplify Methodist evangelism and represent an independent mobility which, as I shall explore in Chapter 6, was a distinguishing feature of poetic Romanticism.³¹ If, as Erik Routley suggests, ‘Romanticism touched Dissent chiefly at the point of *adventure*’, then the Dissenting *itinerant* impulse of Methodism could certainly be seen as one of the points at which it touched literary Romanticism. These creative and religious initiatives shared the restless and adventurous spirit which reflected an impatience of formal boundaries, and reflected independent visionary perspectives. They were each driven by the energy and idealism of a communicative mission that challenged sedentary conservatism.³²

John Wesley confessed his strong initial ambivalence to the idea of field preaching which contradicted a habitual deference to established church practice:

I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.³³

However, he went on to acknowledge how the scriptural ‘Sermon on the Mount’ represented ‘one pretty remarkable precedent of field-preaching’.³⁴

³¹ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp. 33, 208.

³² Routley, *English Religious Dissent*, p. 162.

³³ Sun., 1st April 1739, *Journals II, Works*, XIX, p. 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Wesley was persuaded by George Whitefield to continue the missionary work amongst the Kingswood miners which his own imminent departure to America would make it impossible for him to complete. He was of course to overcome his initial misgivings and private conflict in a future dedicated to his itinerant revivalist mission.

One early illustration of Wesley's parallel loyalties is supplied by his preaching of a sermon on his father's grave in Epworth churchyard.³⁵ The incident is emblematic of a man who retained a loyalty to the traditions which his father upheld while significantly diverging from his practice in choosing to deliver those truths in the open air outside the walls of his father's church. The iconic image of John Wesley addressing an attentive crowd from his father's tomb seems emblematic of the way in which his career and personality straddled the divide between two potentially opposing positions, the respectable orthodoxy of his Anglican inheritance and an independent, itinerant evangelism. It demonstrated the mediatory role he was consequently often obliged to assume. Wesley's seemingly contradictory allegiances and practice were to invite criticism and challenge from members of both the sacred and secular establishment. At the heart of the debate was the contentious issue of religious extremism, or 'that many-headed monster, Enthusiasm!'³⁶

I shall now examine the defence which Wesley, in the course of his ministry, was obliged to mount to the criticisms of enthusiasm levelled against his movement. I shall also consider the contradictions which some of his defences revealed. This section will explore how the contrary allegiances and impulses of Wesley's High Church background, political conservatism, and his

³⁵ Sun., 2nd January, 1743, *Journals II, Works*, XIX, 309.

³⁶ 'The Nature of Enthusiasm', *Works*, II, 58.

more radical evangelical mission were expressed in the arguments he framed in his discursive writings.

‘On the Nature of Enthusiasm’: Wesley’s debate

In his influential study, *The Culture of Sensibility*, G. J. Barker-Benfield identifies the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility explicitly with Methodist evangelism, seeing the rise of Methodism as coincident with ‘the rise of the cult and culture of sensibility’ and shaped by its feminine influence.³⁷ This was the sensibility of emotional receptiveness, but it came to be invested with the moral values fostered by a ‘virtuous’ enlightenment discourse that endeavoured to stabilise its feminine potential for indulgent excess. This morally scrupulous sensibility would inform Wesley’s distinction between the genuine and false pretensions to Christian faith, influencing his defence of genuine zeal and mistrust of its irrational, deluded avatar.

Wesley’s sermon, ‘The Nature of Enthusiasm’, first published in 1750 and reprinted as pamphlets in 1755, 1778 and 1789, prefigured Wordsworth’s distinction between a religion of outward observance and inward conviction.

There is a sort of religion, nay, and it is called Christianity too, [...] which is generally allowed to be consistent with common sense, - that is, a religion of form, a round of outward duties performed on a decent, regular manner. You may add orthodoxy thereto, a system of right opinions, yea, and some quantity of heathen morality; and yet not many will pronounce that ‘much religion hath made you mad.’ But if you aim at the religion of the heart, if

³⁷ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. xxvi- xxvii.

you talk of 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost', then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, 'Thou art beside thyself'.³⁸

An evangelical creed rooted in the concept of instantaneous, 'Extraordinary' revelation was always going to require a strenuous defence in the climate of enlightenment rationalism, but John Wesley, as both ardent believer and eloquent rationalist, was well equipped to conduct it. By satirically opposing orthodox practice to evangelical conviction, Wesley invited his readers to question the relative integrity of each expression of faith, challenging the conventional designation of the first as genuine Christianity and the second as enthusiastic delusion. The terms he applied to the religion of the head are mechanical and devoid of the energy which he implicitly attributed to the religion of the heart. The terms 'common sense', 'form', 'outward duties', a 'regular manner', 'right opinions', express the classical criteria of order and propriety to which he - and Wordsworth later - in their traditional university education, would have subscribed. In its unthinking compliance with orthodox principles, this expression of religion nevertheless lacks the independent connection which characterises personal conviction. By contrast, the discourse associated with inward religion, with its talk of 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost', has the emotional excitement of inspiration. This kind of discourse would inevitably be more heightened, more expansive, bolder in its claims of personal revelation and communion. Wesley appreciated that it therefore invited charges of madness – excess, instability and self-delusion - the hallmarks of a dangerous enthusiasm. The joyful assurance which Wesley describes is bold, certainly, yet he suggests that this kind of experience is not

³⁸ 'Nature of Enthusiasm', *Works*, II, 46.

only possible, but a crucial indicator of genuine faith. And the discourse of 'righteousness, peace and joy', it is implied, is no presumptuous rhetoric but a believer's honest declaration of faith.

As a concept, 'enthusiasm' explicitly or implicitly informed Wesley's ideology as much as it was later to influence literary Romanticism; however, in view of the regular, negative application of the word to religion, Wesley showed more literal, discursive engagement with the complex semantics of this 'dark, ambiguous word' which is 'scarce out of some men's mouths', and yet 'rarely understood'. 'Always having been a word of loose, uncertain sense, to which no determinate meaning was affixed', the word 'enthusiasm', as Wesley acknowledged, had spawned confused and contradictory interpretations which resulted in it being misapplied to sincere conviction.³⁹

That Methodism was negatively classified as enthusiastic might nevertheless seem ironical in view of the fact that the word's Greek etymology of 'possession by the divine' could equally, positively denote the joyful conviction of salvation that characterised the New Birth experience of conversion. But the New Birth, in its extreme claims and expression, was, for many critics, the most troubling manifestation of enthusiastic hysteria. William Warburton, The Bishop of Gloucester, considered it 'enthusiasm or fanaticism' to talk of the 'new birth'.⁴⁰ Wesley exclaimed against the New Birth being made an object of ridicule and defined it instead as 'that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is created anew in Christ Jesus,

³⁹ 'Nature of Enthusiasm', *Works*, II, 47- 8.

⁴⁰ Wesley, 'A Letter to the Lord. Bishop of Gloucester', *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, ed. by G.R. Cragg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), *Works*, XI, 525.

(Eph. 2: 10) when it is renewed after the image of God' (Col. 3: 2). The Methodist evangelists claimed scriptural precedent for this emotional conviction of salvation and in common with other Dissenting sects, considered themselves to be restoring an original apostolic vision.

Wesley's capacity for both emotional identification and rational detachment informed his defence, and his rationalisations of enthusiasm, in various publications. Chief amongst these were 'The Nature of Enthusiasm', the *Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, published in 1743 and 1745, and various letters to different figures of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, published in the early, pioneering years of his ministry. The explicit appeal to 'men of reason and religion' flatters the receptive discernment of his readers while implying that there need be no contradiction between reason and religious faith. Although Wesley celebrated the essentially emotional source of genuine enthusiasm, he was, like Wordsworth in his literary theory, careful to acknowledge its rational foundation, emphasising that true Religion is 'the spirit of a sound mind', and crediting every genuine Christian with the rational ability to distinguish between truth and imposture in Christian witness: 'every reasonable Christian may discern' the mental 'disorder' of a false enthusiast.

Yet to the orthodox critics for whom enthusiasm was synonymous with anti-rationalism, a zealous creed which, according to Bishop Gibson, attracted 'mechanics' and 'ignorant women', could never be redeemed as a genuine religion of the heart. For the hostile Warburton, for example, enthusiasm was 'a kind of ebullition or critical ferment of the mind'; whose 'fervours soon rise into madness when unchecked by reason', and Methodism's irrational appeal to ignorant emotion, 'generated fumes which obscured the understanding and

destroyed the judgement'.⁴¹ In Warburton's opinion, Methodist enthusiasts were dangerously presumptuous, self-styled 'prophets' with an 'inflammatory' communicative style'.⁴² Citing scriptural authority, Wesley insisted, on the contrary, that the Methodist doctrine of 'impressions and assurances' was 'both scriptural and rational'.⁴³

In his *Appeal to Men of Reason*, Wesley responded with measured restraint to the diatribe of Bishop George Lavington of Exeter: *On The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*. This treatise had exploited any weaknesses or inconsistencies in Wesley's journals, dramatising the more extravagant manifestations of emotion at the Methodist meetings.⁴⁴ Wesley answered Lavington's accusations point by point, defending himself with reference to scripture. Implicitly warning against an undue preoccupation with terms, Wesley challenged him to distinguish the boundaries between false and genuine religion.⁴⁵ In answering the charges levelled against enthusiasm, Wesley acknowledged its pejorative sense of fanaticism which originated during the Puritan excesses of the seventeenth-century Civil War period, but attempted to redeem even this inflammatory term by declaring 'fanaticism' to be 'no other than 'heart religion'', and thus the same as 'righteousness'.⁴⁶ For Wesley, the purification of religious enthusiasm involved a rehabilitation and sometimes a reinterpretation of language.

⁴¹ Warburton, *Works*, p. 38, quoted in 'Introduction', *Appeals*, *Works*, XI, 25-26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴³ Wesley, 'A Second Letter to Bishop Lavington, the Author of *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd*', *Appeals*, *Works*, XI, 425.

⁴⁴ Bishop George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*, 3 parts (London, 1759-61).

⁴⁵ Wesley, 'Letter to Bishop Lavington', *Appeals*, *Works*, XI, 382.

⁴⁶ Mon. August 12th, 1771, *Journals V (1765-1775)* ed. by Reginald Ward (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), *Works*, XXII, 287.

Wesley was himself accused of having ‘fanaticised his followers and deprived them of their senses’, and was warned by Archbishop Herring against the indiscretion of mistaking ‘the enthusiastic ardours of the Methodists as the true and only Christianity’.⁴⁷ In his *Observations on the Conduct of a certain Sect usually distinguished by the name of Methodists*, Bishop Gibson, a powerful figure on the Episcopal bench, disparagingly referred to ‘the wild and undigested effusions of enthusiastical teachers’.⁴⁸ Wesley would endorse his critics’ definition of false enthusiasm as an expression of the self-deluded imagination while disassociating himself from this manifestation of enthusiasm. Wesley’s sense of dangerous enthusiasm’s deceptive origin is shown in his frequent use of the words ‘imaginative’ and ‘imaginary’ for those enthusiasts who ‘imagine themselves to be what they are not’, and who lack the self- knowledge to perceive the difference: ‘First know your disease: your whole life is enthusiasm; as being all suitable to the imagination, that you have received that grace of God which you have not’. Similarly, in his response to the Bishop of Gloucester, Wesley declared the self-deception of those directed by ‘the impulses of an inflamed fancy,’ and who ‘think to attain the ends without the means, which is enthusiasm properly so called. Again they think themselves inspired by God and were not. But false, imaginary inspiration is enthusiasm’.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Wesley, ‘A Second Letter to the Author of *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*, *Appeals*, Works, XI, 413; ‘Introduction’, Cragg, citing Smallbrooke, *Charge*, p. 1, cf, p. 51: ‘The Christian religion is no enthusiasm’, *Appeals*, Works, XI, 97.

⁴⁸ Wesley, ‘A Letter to The Lord Bishop of London’ (1747), *Appeals*, Works, XI, 330.

⁴⁹ Wesley, ‘A Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Gloucester’ (London, 1763), *Appeals*, Works, XI, 492, 493.

Alert to the contradictions inherent in a simultaneous defence and condemnation of enthusiasm, the Revd. Lewis in 1747 accused Wesley of the same delusion:

Is not your answer then evasive when you ask if there be any enthusiasm in the love of God, etc...? You know that censure was laid on the pretended revelations and seraphical flights in your and Mr. Whitefield's journals, and on the ecstatic fits and fancied impulse, feelings and visions of some of your followers, all of which certainly have a strong tincture of enthusiasm. And as to speculative points, that censure was likewise passed on the Methodist doctrines of an imaginary new birth, an imaginary new faith and an imaginary assurance.⁵⁰

Rev. Lewis's repeated use of the word 'imaginary' conveys his sense of the potentially dangerous creative power of an imagination unregulated by formal doctrinal precepts. Typically for critics of the enthusiastic style, however, the inflated terms in which Lewis expresses its excesses: 'pretended revelations and seraphical flights', 'ecstatic fits and fancied impulse', replicate the idiom of the discourse he censures.

Although Wesley's analysis of enthusiasm was based on the conventionally negative interpretation of the word against which he defined his own position, he acknowledged its different origins and senses. He identified as 'proper' enthusiasm the holy inspiration of the Biblical prophets and apostles who were moved 'in their hearts' to service and eloquence by the indwelling spirit of

⁵⁰ Revd. John Lewis to John Wesley, Oct. 5th, 1747, *Letters II, 1740-1755*, ed. by Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), *Works*, XXVI, 262.

God. These were the original, genuine enthusiasts who were ‘so filled with the Spirit, and so influenced by Him who dwelt in their hearts, that the exercise of their own reason, their senses, and all their natural faculties, being suspended, they were wholly actuated by the power of God, and ‘spake’ only ‘as they were moved by the Holy Ghost’. Such inspiration was clearly divinely authorised, although it still demonstrated the supernatural ‘possession’ and apparent suspension of reason which disturbed rational critics of the Extraordinary Revelation represented by the New Birth.

The more traditional perception of religious enthusiasm, positive or negative, as the instantaneous revelation of the Extraordinary Call, was nevertheless challenged in ‘The Nature of Enthusiasm’ by Wesley’s concluding description of genuine faith as a progressive deepening of knowledge and commitment through ‘the ordinary channels of his grace’ representing ‘a daily growth in that pure and holy and religion which the world always did and always will call “enthusiasm”’. Enthusiasm here represents the deeper communion achieved in a fusion of the ordinary and extraordinary through which the genuine enthusiast achieved a more stable and enduring fulfilment than intermittent episodes of excitement could provide. At the same time, the sermon’s closing scriptural citation of ‘the most High; ‘righteousness and peace’; and fountain of living water, springing up into everlasting life!’ expresses the inspirational energy and renewing power felt to characterise the extraordinary attributes of religious or creative zeal.⁵¹

Wesley acknowledged a more broadly secular interpretation of enthusiasm as the creative energy which inspired the writing of such poets as Homer and

⁵¹ ‘Nature of Enthusiasm’, *Works*, II, 60.

Virgil, where it denoted 'an uncommon vigour of thought, a peculiar fervour of spirit, a vivacity and strength not to be found in common men; elevating the soul to greater and higher things than cool reason could have attained'.⁵²

Although this was the enthusiasm of poetic, rather than religious inspiration, in his use of the word 'soul', Wesley accepted, in terms which anticipated Wordsworth's defence of the *Lyrical Ballads*, its spiritual origins. In its union of the secular and sublime, this definition of enthusiasm was most attuned to Romantic ideology. Above all, it expressed an energetic connection which was favourably contrasted with a coolly rational objectivity. This enthusiasm denoted an energetic, holistic engagement of mind, heart and imagination; it was set against not just the false enthusiasm of extravagant delusion but also a passionless reason. It seems interesting that Wesley applies the term 'heathen' not to poets like Homer and Virgil, but, in his opening paragraph, to the 'heathen morality' of nominal Christians and enthusiastic pretenders where it expresses a general lack of the genuine faith that inspires sincere action and expression.

While acknowledging the popular perception of enthusiasm as irrational, Wesley defended the emotional response wherever it was genuine. And for him, the touchstone of truth was experience. Without the knowledge of genuine experience, suggested Wesley, any judgement is worthless: 'Whatever is spoken of as the religion of the heart', he declared, 'and of the inward change by the spirit of God, must appear enthusiastic to those who have not felt them; (that is, if they take upon them to judge the things which they know not)'.⁵³ For Wesley, as for most other critics and enthusiasts, the central distinction

⁵² 'Nature of Enthusiasm', *Works*, II, 60.

⁵³ Mon. 12th Nov. 1739, *Journals II, Works*, XIX, 121-22.

between negative and positive enthusiasm was the degree to which it was felt and known through emotional revelation. Enthusiasm in its negative sense was therefore identified with all sentiment that was simulated and all faith that was assumed, whether in emphatic demonstration or in pious but hollow practice.

Wesley's confident distinction between outward and inward religion was based on an intense personal experience of the difference. This was a spiritual disillusionment and despair succeeded by a revelation of God's saving grace. Returning, on a turbulent sea crossing, from a largely unsuccessful missionary expedition to American Georgia, Wesley confessed, in a journal entry on January 24th, 1738, to a lack of private conviction, despite his public assertions:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me?

Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled.⁵⁴

He recognised that he had methodically performed 'a round of outward duties' in a purely rational and dutiful allegiance to Christian doctrine without being inwardly convinced. This recognition was the difference between the spurious enthusiasm of empty declaration implied in, 'I can talk well', and inspired connectedness. He was to experience this genuine enthusiasm later at an evening's meeting in Aldergate street, 24th May 1738, where for the first time, he felt the meaning of Christ's sacrifice through the speaker's emphasis on faith as an inward experience:

⁵⁴ Tue, Jan 24th, 1738, *Journals I (1735-1738)*, ed. by Ward (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), *Works*, XVIII, 211.

While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.⁵⁵

The emphatic italicisation of the first person pronouns expresses the wonder of personal conviction and connection which distinguished false from genuine enthusiasm. The integrity of the latter was evident in the simple directness of language inspired by experience rather than formal knowledge. It is the 'heart' which was affected, but by being 'strangely warmed', which, in contrast with extravagant protestation, has the restraint of a deeper emotional assurance.

Wesley would nevertheless seem to have sought the more ecstatic confirmation experienced by other converts, including his brother Charles, and was disappointed by the elusiveness of the joy he anticipated as a central component of enthusiastic revelation. 'But where was the joy?' he went on to ask in the aftermath of this experience, and attributed his doubts to the prompting of the devil.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how John Wesley attempted to validate his religious mission and defend the integrity of Methodism by distancing himself from a false enthusiasm. This was the kind of enthusiasm associated with a vulgarly inflated style and with presumptuous pretensions to divine favour. At the same

⁵⁵ Jan 24th, 1738, *Journals II, Works*, XIX, 249-50.

time, Wesley needed to defend the genuine zeal which inspired his sincere journey of faith. This involved steering a fine course between genuine passion and histrionics, and elevating the first. The challenge was intensified by the conflict that existed between his own faith in emotional revelation and a constitutional rationality. Despite a yearning for self-transcendence, Wesley was frustrated by his own inability to achieve and sustain a heightened emotional experience. It was a paradox acknowledged by Alexander Knox, who in his appendix to Robert Southey's *Life of Wesley*, remarks that 'Mr. Wesley would have been an enthusiast if he could'.⁵⁶ As a consequence, Wesley was occasionally misled by a failure to distinguish a genuine zeal from its spurious avatar, something the more highly tuned sensibilities of his brother Charles were quicker to detect. In the next chapter, I shall consider how John Wesley attempted to reconcile rational and emotional imperatives in his own stylistic practice and theory, explaining the debate which this generated and the challenge that it involved. I shall also consider the strategies which John and his brother Charles employed to discipline the intensities of Charles's lyric gift in the collected Methodist *Hymns* and mitigate their tendency to enthusiastic excess.

⁵⁶ Alexander Knox, 'Remarks on the Life and Character of Mr. John Wesley' (1828), appended to Southey's *Life of Wesley*, II, 409-504 (p. 434).

Chapter 2

Restraining strategies: seeking a balance between emotion and reason in Wesleyan discourse

This chapter will examine John and Charles Wesley's communicative method and consider how it was applied to the central evangelical media of the sermon and the hymn. It will discuss the strategies which the Wesley brothers employed to authorise and discipline a discourse that was negatively identified with the *common* and the *female* voice in its capacity to inflame emotion and the sensual imagination. I have suggested that this rational method was shaped by the Wesleys' simultaneous endorsement of, and embarrassment with, these enthusiastic characteristics. As I shall discuss, a disciplined enthusiasm was demonstrated in John Wesley's plain clarity of diction and Charles Wesley's lyrical use of strong and simple scriptural metaphor.

The sermon and the hymn would seem to have combined the communicative ideal of 'plain, emphatic language', later promoted by Wordsworth, with the rhetorical techniques that the public and oral projection of Methodist discourse demanded. The resulting, sometimes uneasy, balance between simple restraint and theatricality produced the distinctive impact, but controversial character, of Methodist diction. With reference to the criteria which John Wesley applied in the composition and transmission of his sermons, in his editing of his brother's hymns, and in a consideration of

Charles' own poetic method, I shall examine the dynamic tension resulting from the attempt to reconcile stylistically the imperatives of reason and emotion. This synthetic aim produced a creative tension acknowledged in David Hempton's description of Methodism as a movement that 'thrived on the boundary lines of rationality and emotional ecstasy'.¹

Because I believe issues of gender to be a central element in responses to 'enthusiasm', I shall examine the way in which evangelistic discourse was identified with feminine sentiment and consequently disparaged by those anxious to defend masculine standards of order and reason and the institutions which embodied them.² I shall explore Methodism's particular identification with the feminine in its encouragement of emotional expansiveness and intuitive connection, and in the implicit empowerment of women within the movement. There was a tension in the endorsement of sensibility and an equivalent pressure to preserve the rational authority of the Methodist movement, and I explain how this was reflected in language which tried to steer a course between affection and restraint. This will acknowledge the challenge which faced both religious and Romantic writers in their attempts to articulate the sublime.

Accessible simplicity

John Wesley's commitment to communicative clarity is most clearly expressed in three letters written to Samuel Furly in 1764, in which he advised the apprentice preacher to observe the stylistic precepts of 'perspicuity and purity,

¹ Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, p. 131.

² Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 53.

propriety, strength and easiness joined together'.³ He suggested that Furly's own communicability might be impeded by the formal university diction which John had also tried to modify in himself to achieve the accessibility necessary for uneducated listeners. The Wesleys emulated the missionary imperatives of connectedness promoted by the evangelist Isaac Watts (1674-1748), who in Part 1 Chapter 8 of *The Improvement of the Mind* (1741) cited Ergartes as a model of the good preacher for the way in which 'he makes the nature of his subject and the necessity of his hearers, the great rule to direct him what method he should choose in every sermon, that he the better enlighten, convince and persuade'.⁴ Wesley's principles advocated the rational precision favoured by his culture, 'strength', in his view, consisting in 'conciseness' rather than enthusiastic expansiveness.⁵ His essentially functional aims prompted him to adapt his language not just 'to every capacity', but to varied modes and contexts. In whichever situation, however, Wesley advised Furly that 'clearness in particular is necessary for you and me, because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding. Therefore we, above all, if we think with the wise, yet must speak with the vulgar'.⁶ Wesley nevertheless insisted that the religious ideas expressed in simple language should in no sense be simplified or debased in accordance with patronising assumptions of the limited intellectual capacity of the common man.

He went so far as to encourage in lay preachers the use of regional dialects for more effective communication with uneducated listeners on the grounds

³ Letter to Furly, July 15, 1764, *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. by John Telford, 8 vols, *Letters IV*, 1758-1766 (London: Epworth Press, 1931), p. 256.

⁴ Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* (1780), quoted Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment I, Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 174.

⁵ Letter to Furly, July 15, 1764, *Letters*, IV, pp. 257-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

that it fostered a close and trusting relationship beneficial to the mission.⁷

Indeed, despite Wesley's own concern for linguistic propriety, his written and spoken language sometimes contained 'touches of homely and forceful slang, of popular dialect and paremiology', showing the 'neat clergyman's familiarity with the language of the cottage, the inn, the country market, and so on'.⁸ As a cultural middleman trying to adjust his language and message to the comprehension of the lower classes, he was as much criticised for commonness as admired for his gentlemanly qualities. The young Walter Scott, for example, despite his own pleasure in the 'excellent stories' Wesley related, described his sermons as 'vastly too colloquial', at least 'for the taste' of his companion, Saunders.⁹ This colloquialism was obviously even more evident in the uneducated itinerants whom Wesley employed on the missionary circuit. There was not the cultural and social division between such preachers and their listeners as existed between the educated leadership and their followers and consequently less need for the modification of style required of the latter.

Although John Wesley may have subordinated more formal literary criteria to the functional imperative of general communicability, he was anxious to maintain basic standards of lexical propriety.¹⁰ Favouring, as Wordsworth was to do, a decorous and dignified simplicity, he aimed to imitate 'the language of the common people [...] so far as consists with *purity* and *propriety* of speech'. To Samuel Furly he specified: 'We must constantly use the most common, little, easy words (*so they are pure and proper*) which our language affords'

⁷ Van Noppen, pp. 117-18.

⁸ Lawton, *John Wesley's English*, pp. 191-21, and 'The Slang and Colloquial Expressions in Wesley's Letters', in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 32, (1959), 5-11, (p. 9).

⁹ H.J.C. Grierson, *Letters of Sir Walter Scott* V (London: Constable, 1933), pp. 340f.

¹⁰ Wesley to Samuel Furly, March 6 and July 15, 1764, *Letters*, IV, p. 256, 232, pp. 256-8.

(my italics).¹¹ Wesley aimed to avoid the ‘barbarous and low expressions’ he was careful to omit from his own dictionary.¹² He attempted to observe the distinction between a ‘plain’, in the sense of ‘simple’, and ‘common’, in the sense of ‘coarse’ language often criticised in popular enthusiastic discourse. These linguistic scruples denoted an inherited respect for formal tenets of literary taste. John Wesley’s definition of good taste implicitly endorsed certain cultured precepts when expressed as an ‘ability to discern faults no matter how camouflaged, and to enjoy excellence’, and seemed to exhibit an educated discrimination. On the other hand, Wesley’s description of beauty as ‘that internal sense which relishes and distinguishes its proper object’ indicates more flexible aesthetic criteria. He exercises a discriminatory principle that is adapted to context and warns against too fastidious a taste in practice, advising Furly not to ‘expect propriety of speech from uneducated persons’.¹³

Keenly aware of the power of words, John aimed to establish equality by addressing his auditors with the ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ traditionally reserved for intimate and lower class relationships, as well as echoing the archaic dignity of religious address popularised by the Puritans. A more intimate form of address, ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ had traditionally been applied by the lower classes to each other or to their social inferiors. The use of the older pronouns is significant on several counts. It reminds us that the oral discourse of the Methodist sermon is one of direct address which often employed a conversational mode to better engage the audience. It also illustrates the practical, rather than philosophical premise on which the common voice was adopted. The use of thee and thou is revealing, too, in terms of its relationship to the independent discourse of

¹¹ Wesley to Samuel Furly, March 6 and July 15, 1764, *Letters*, IV, pp. 232, 258.

¹² Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (London, 1777).

¹³ Letter to Furly, Jan 25th, 1762, *Letters*, IV, p. 169.

Dissent. Seventeenth-century Quakers, for instance, chose to retain these older pronouns in preference to the more generically applied modern 'you'. Their use in the context of the sermon and within religious literature more generally seemed to denote a deliberate policy of inclusiveness and connection which might be felt to threaten traditional hierarchies by encouraging the assertion of the common voice. However, despite his identification with the ordinary voice, John Wesley was inevitably distanced by his authoritative role and education, and his precise communicative criteria were not always personally observed or consistently applied by his zealous disciples.¹⁴

Methodism's 'verbal magic'

The Methodist mission was manifested verbally, and largely orally, as Diane Lobody asserts in her claim that 'early Methodism was deeply verbal in character, a religious faith [...] whose foundation was the transforming word.'¹⁵ Van Noppen's adoption of the phrase 'transforming word(s)' for the title of his study of Methodist discourse acknowledges the persuasive power of Methodist rhetoric but also the transformative capacity that Wesley, and Wordsworth at a later date, claimed for his work, and which constituted the 'birth' of a new spiritual vision and relationship with the religious or natural sublime. Although 'transform' is apposite for both literary and religious revivalists' attempts to renew both heart and mind, 'word' also denoted a capacity to change established belief and practice in a way considered threatening by those of traditional loyalties. The association of Methodism with

¹⁴ See David Crystal's analysis in *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, repr. 2000), p. 71

¹⁵ Diane H. Lobody, "'That language might be given me': Women's experience in Early Methodism", *Perspectives of American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. by E. Richey and others (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 127-144 (p. 128).

radical enthusiasm would have influenced the communicative practice of the loyalist Wesleys who sought to inspire without inflaming, through a language of forceful but restrained simplicity. Accusations of enthusiasm were likely to have influenced John Wesley's concern to cleanse his language of the coarsenesses associated with popular emotionalism.

David Hempton suggests that religious historians may have underestimated the significance of the *language* of Methodism and its psychological impact, although contemporary critics were suspiciously aware of its power. In *Empire of the Spirit*, he emphasises the need to be attentive to the oral, communicative dimension of the Methodist movement to appreciate the extent and nature of its influence.¹⁶ Hempton's description of the revivalist meeting 'pulsing with exclamatory noise' emphasises the auditory impact of its enthusiastic tenor.¹⁷ 'Noise' expresses the confused excitement of a communal experience, but, also, more negatively, the potentially anarchic energy of this excitement. Donald Mathew's study of the 'psychodynamics of Methodist orality' similarly emphasises the significance of Methodism's essentially oral mode as a source of the vitality and immediacy which characterised its enthusiastic style and was thus central to its charismatic impact.¹⁸

Because the aim of the Methodist mission was to convince and convert, the language in which its message was delivered displayed the persuasive rhetorical features best designed to fulfil this objective: 'the founders of Methodism knew how to choose the words, images and styles which edged

¹⁶ David Hempton also suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the language of Methodist evangelism in his conclusion to *The Religion of the People, Methodism and Popular Religion, c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 198

¹⁷ Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, p. 56.

¹⁸ D.G. Mathews, 'Evangelical America – the Methodist ideology', R. E. Richey, K. E. Rowe and J.M. Schmidt (eds.), *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), cited in Hempton, *Religion of the People*, p. 12.

their way into the hearts, minds and memories of their audiences'.¹⁹ It was a skill which some at the time saw as manipulative; as George Lavington satirically observed: 'What Heart can stand out against their persuasive Eloquence, their extravagantly fine Flights and Allusions?'²⁰ Rhetorical features were particularly pronounced because the communicative mode of the movement was primarily oral, through the medium of the hymn and the sermon, often delivered out of doors. They included the rhythm and repetition and also the emphatic emotive register designed to engage a listener or reader's sympathies. Indeed, critics of Methodist discourse attributed its seductively emotive impact to 'its rhythmical and figurative language as well as [to] its diction'.²¹ Designed to hold the listener's attention, a popular preaching style might lack the subtlety or syntactical complexity better adapted for the leisured perusal of the written word. Simpler dramatic techniques were nevertheless effectively employed to achieve the 'exciting powerful preaching' which Charles Finney, writing a generation later, considered imperative to win disciples.²²

In the early stages of their ministry, in 1739, John and his brother Charles had been warned by Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. John Potter, to 'forbear exceptional phrases', a euphemism for the heightened, figurative rhetoric of enthusiasm. The Archbishop recognised the derision which extreme language would provoke, and doubtless acknowledged the seductive impact of such

¹⁹ Van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, p. 9.

²⁰ Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists*, part II, p. 4.

²¹ Françoise Deconinck-Brossard and Jean-Pierre van Noppen, 'The Specificities of John Wesley's Language', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85, Nos 2+3, Summer and Autumn 2003, 251-267 (p. 283).

²² 'Lecture on Revivals in Religion' (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p.273, quoted John Munsey Turner, *The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England* (London: Epworth Press), p. 50.

discourse.²³ A discomfort with the power of immoderate Methodist rhetoric is expressed in the term ‘magic’ applied to its enthusiastic expression.²⁴ The word ‘magic’ also evokes the mysterious, potentially threatening nature of the New Birth conversion manifested in a lack of emotional and physical control. As John Wesley’s *Journal* relates: ‘A Woman broke out into strong cries, Drops of Sweat ran down her face, and all her bones shook’, symptoms which Bishop Lavington attributed to the ‘diabolical Possessions, Magic and Sorcery’ of ‘wicked Imposters’.²⁵ As a positive persuasive attribute, this magic could be seen to consist in the rhetorical components which aimed to teach, delight and move.²⁶ However, for critics of Methodism, ‘magic’ negatively denoted the disarming and deceptive power of its verbal evangelism and dangerous capacity for emotional manipulation.²⁷

The success of the Methodist evangelists was nevertheless largely due to the *charisma* implicit in magic, and the enthusiastic energy which generated it. Significantly for the enthusiastic convictions of Methodist missionaries, the word ‘charisma’ has a sublime resonance, being rooted in the Greek etymology of ‘grace’ and defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a divinely conferred power or talent’.²⁸ The persuasive impact of Methodist evangelism was certainly to a large extent reliant on the personal magnetism of its preachers, although their individual charisma was interpreted in accordance with commentators’ empathy with the Methodist method and message.

Compelling preaching could be sympathetically attributed to a direct, sincere

²³ *The Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley*, M.A., 2 vols., ed. by Thomas Jackson (London: Mason, 1849), 1, 143.

²⁴ Van Noppen, p. 9.

²⁵ Mon. 30th April, 1739, *Journals III*, pp. 52-53, quoted in Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists*, pp. 18, 23.

²⁶ Lawton, *John Wesley’s English*, Ch. 12.

²⁷ See discussion by van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, pp. 105-8.

²⁸ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

delivery: 'Wherever the Methodists have gone, their plain, pointed and simple but warm and animated mode of preaching has always gathered congregations'.²⁹ George Whitefield, on the other hand was famed for a more theatrical charisma which could inspire or repel those less receptive to a flamboyant revivalist style. Although Wesley personally advocated and attempted to practise a calmly controlled pulpit delivery, Whitefield's more histrionic techniques earned him the accolade of 'Son of Thunder'.³⁰

Robert Southey, ever mistrustful of enthusiastic excess, was nevertheless impressed by what he felt to be the sincerity of Whitefield's 'earnestness of persuasion' and 'outpouring of redundant love'.³¹ James Lackington, however, who heard Whitefield preach in the Tabernacle in 1700, indicated the preacher's manipulative power when relating how his powerful emotional impact overpowered habitual self-control: 'In every sermon that I heard him preach, he would sometimes make them ready to burst with laughter, and the next moment drown them in tears; indeed it was scarce possible for the most guarded to escape their effect'.³² Bishop Lavington suggests Whitefield's presumptuous emulation of the rhapsodic missionary style of the early church in his sardonic reference to him 'flying upon the wings of Inspiration, and talking sublimely in the apostolic style'.³³ Yet both George Whitefield and John Wesley possessed the different, but equally powerful charisma of personal presence which compelled attention. Wesley was described by Frederick Davenport as 'the most terribly impressive preacher that England

²⁹ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals in Religion* (London: R. Groombridge, 1839), p. 273.

³⁰ Rev. J.B. Wakeley, *Anecdotes of George Whitefield*, 10th edn (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1879).

³¹ Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1, 127.

³² James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (London 1791), p.105.

³³ Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists*, p. 46.

ever knew', while future evangelist John Nelson was so receptive to his quieter charisma that 'his heart beat like the pendulum of a clock' in response to a particularly pertinent address.³⁴

As with the lecture, the public, rhetorical techniques of the sermon inevitably involved the dramatic techniques of amplification and self-projection which could militate against Wesley's strictures of modest restraint. This dynamic style could also encourage the cult of personality which increasingly surrounded Wesley and his mission. This cult was strikingly manifested in the numerous reproductions of Wesley's image during and after his lifetime, and especially evident in the popular publicity surrounding his funeral. John Wesley achieved celebrity status through his own commanding and controlling role within the Methodist movement, but also by the way his charismatic impact was amplified by the expanding commercial media of the popular press. Henry Abelove acknowledges both Wesley's personal charisma and his publicist skills in his assertion that 'No other contemporary managed a pastoral stance so strangely monopolistic and seductive; no other achieved a comparable result'.³⁵

Appropriate pulpit style: John Wesley's Advice to Preachers

Since the reputation of the Methodist movement depended on its dignified representation, Wesley felt it necessary to offer precise guidelines on effective and appropriate pulpit delivery. Enthusiastic energy was popularly perceived as

³⁴ F. M. Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals: A Study in Mental and Social Evolution* (New York, 1905); John Nelson, *The Yorkshire Stonemason. The Story of his Life told by Himself* (London, 1903).

³⁵ Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 40.

being *physically* manifested in a way that provoked distaste and alarm amongst educated observers. The term 'clown' and clownishness had already been applied by Addison to the physical and social oddities of enthusiasts like the Quakers.³⁶ Wesley's detailed advice acknowledged how Methodism, in the essentially oral and physical transmission of its message in a public open-air context, was continually exposed to critical scrutiny. The guidelines therefore identified faults in delivery and choice of language and warned against the distracting oddities of manner which invited ridicule. While Wesley valued and authorised sincerely passionate delivery, his advice acknowledged the inflammatory power of enthusiasm; it addressed both the best interests of the speaker who needed to avoid being consumed by enthusiasm, and those of his susceptible listeners.

Although Wesley's own sermons, certainly in the early days of his ministry, frequently inspired passionate and extravagant responses in his listeners, he personally endeavoured to avoid the ranting tub thumping of popular Methodist tradition. He was generally felt to have achieved 'a rhetoric characterised by rigorous reasoning as much as by emotive appeals', an ideal synthesis encapsulated in Rack's representation of him as a 'reasonable enthusiast'.³⁷ John Hampson observed of his preaching style: 'His voice was not loud but clear and manly, his style neat, simple, perspicuous and admirably adapted to the capacity of his hearers'.³⁸ This image of rational control, precision and shrewd judgement is in obvious contrast with the popular impression of

³⁶ Lawrence E. Klein, 'Sociability, Solitude and Enthusiasm', in *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650-1850*, ed. by Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1998), pp. 153- 177 (p. 154-5).

³⁷ W. A. Hansen, *John Wesley and the Rhetoric of Reform* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oregon, 1972), quoted in van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, p.33.

³⁸ John Hampson, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. John Wesley*, 3 vols (Sunderland, 1791), III, 168-9.

Methodist hysteria, the reference to the ‘manly’ and ‘muscular’ nature of Wesley’s style serving to counteract the movement’s association with feminine emotionalism. It suggests that Wesley’s evangelism rested on foundations more secure than the ‘shaking sands of inward impulses’ which the Bishop of Lincoln attributed to Methodism; indeed, Wesley’s essentially stable temperament might be considered to have anchored his movement and its longer term reputation.³⁹

In his *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture*, John Wesley urged preachers to avoid emphatic enthusiastic gestures: ‘Never clap your hands, nor thump the pulpit’, gestures even now associated with an evangelical exuberance which traditional worshippers can find embarrassingly demonstrative. He urged a controlled and dignified demeanour in his injunction that: ‘Your hands are not to be in perpetual motion: this the ancients called the babbling of hands’, both for the undignified, excitable impression it produced and the way such mannerisms distracted auditors from the sense and message of an address.⁴⁰ Pace and tone of delivery should similarly serve the primary aim of communicative clarity. He also stressed that the emphatic intonation associated with enthusiastic discourse was designed not for self-dramatisation but moral direction.

Recommending the natural diction of men speaking to men, Wesley advised his preachers to adopt the unaffected conversational style best calculated to connect with listeners: ‘Endeavour to speak in public just as you do in “common conversation”’. ‘Common’ here denotes *ordinary* rather than ‘mean’ and, on a premise of equality, addresses a commonality of shared

³⁹ John Green, Bishop of Lincoln, *The Principles and Practices of Methodists Considered* (London, 1760), quoted by Turner, p. 36.

⁴⁰ *Directions on Pronunciation and Gesture* (Bristol, 1749), p. 11.

experience. This 'common' also implies a practical wisdom made accessible to an audience with no sophisticated pretensions or expectations. The natural, understated sincerity of a conversational style was to be preferred over the flamboyant self-regarding rhetoric which public speaking could encourage. Wesley trusted that the confidence that came with experience would liberate his preachers from distracting preoccupation with technique: 'When you have acquired a good habit of speaking, you will no more need any tedious reflections upon this art, but will speak as easily as gracefully'. This assertion might seem to advocate the unstudied spontaneity which could contradict the precise control he also favoured, yet all Wesley's advice on communicative technique observed the basic criterion of communicability best achieved, in his view, through rhetorical or conversational simplicity. The suggestion of quiet intimacy implicit in the conversational naturalness which Wesley advocated may nevertheless have ignored the need for the projection and amplification which addressing crowds of thousands inevitably involved.

However, Wesley also employed more formally rhetorical devices such as the repeated question felt to characterise enthusiastic pulpit discourse, and a feature of the Wesleyan hymn. In John Wesley's sermon 'Catholic Spirit', for example, a succession of scripturally based interrogatives demand from the listeners a commitment which challenges complacency and prevents a stance of passive detachment : 'Dost thou walk by faith, not by sight? looking not at temporal things, but things eternal? Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, "God over all, blessed for ever?"' Is he revealed in thy soul?'⁴¹ Although this deliberate rhetorical style and method is in apparent contrast with Wesley's

⁴¹ 'Catholic Spirit', no. 39, *Sermons II, Works*, II, 81-95 (p. 87).

recommendation for a conversational intimacy and ease, its form invites response and engagement. By personally addressing the listener, such interrogative rhetoric seeks to activate the spiritual and moral renewal that was the focus of Wesley's religious mission.

Wesley aspired to the communicative ideal of an unaffected fluency. However, the physical projection necessary from the pulpit imposed different demands from those of a written text and might seem to authorise a certain theatricality. Despite his personal principles, Wesley was sometimes personally guilty of enthusiastic lapses of style in pulpit delivery, as Horace Walpole noted when he censured the 'very ugly enthusiasm' which he 'acted' towards the end of an otherwise effective sermon that Walpole heard him deliver in Bath in 1766.⁴² 'Ugly enthusiasm' denotes the irregularities and enthusiasms of gesture, manner and language which offend stylistic decorum, while Walpole's choice of the verb 'acted' suggests that Wesley's delivery involved some manipulation of his audience. Walpole's description of Wesley no doubt reflected the writer's personal distaste for the enthusiastic style interpreted by more receptive auditors as 'a skilful and straightforward rhetoric which went straight to the hearts of men'.⁴³ From the evidence of more negative responses, one might nevertheless deduce that Wesley was more committed to the principle than the practice of verbal simplicity. This example could serve to illustrate the persistent tension between Wesley's educated scruples and instinctive identification with religious enthusiasm.

Wesley emphasised the importance of precision and clarity in the structure as well as the content and language of the sermon, applying the principles of

⁴² *Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. by W. S. Lewis (New York: Yale University Press, 1973), XXXV, 119.

⁴³ Van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, p. 21.

his formal education in a neatly structured three-point argument which most efficiently served his communicative criteria. Wesley's *Journals* reveal how he frequently delivered the same sermon to different audiences while his published collections of sermons encouraged their perusal and reuse. Such an expedient would seem to suggest Wesley's attempt to distance himself from the extempore effusions of the lay itinerants derided by educated listeners and viewed suspiciously for their claims of supernatural aid. John Wesley nevertheless knew that the calculated precision of the technique he advocated must be rooted in intense personal conviction and he could admire the powerful verbal expression of this conviction. Historians and biographers believe, however, that the comparatively small proportion of sermons which have come down to us in written form from John Wesley's vast output do not necessarily accurately reflect the rhetoric of the open air sermon which generally addressed the 'common crowd', and thus relied on more dramatic techniques of oral transmission and emphasis than can be deduced from the printed version.⁴⁴

Methodism's 'feminine' enthusiasm

Critics of enthusiastic Methodist discourse often objected to the conflation of sense and spirit in an indulgent use of sensory metaphor to convey spiritual truth. The fact that this sensuality was particularly apparent in the testimonies of women also seemed to demonstrate or confirm what some considered the effeminising tendency of enthusiastic discourse. The expressive licence of the language of the heart provoked sexually suggestive terms like 'languishing', and 'rapture' which Lavington applies to the sensual ecstasies of Catholic

⁴⁴ Van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, p. 21.

female saints. He draws parallels between the 'wild and pernicious enthusiasms' of such revered 'Saints in the Popish Communion' as St. Theresa and St. Catherine with the 'extravagant Heights' and 'idolatry' of the Methodist discourse at home.⁴⁵ In his *Life of Wesley*, Robert Southey quoted an example of the mystical eroticism he felt characterised female Methodist testimony:

I saw Him, by faith, whose eyes are as a flame of fire [...] I saw the fountain opened in his side. As I hungered he fed me; as I thirsted, He gave me out of that fountain to drink.[...]The love of God was shed abroad in my heart, and a flame kindled there with pains so violent, yet so very ravishing, that my body was almost torn asunder.⁴⁶

This kind of language echoes the luxurious style of George Whitefield notable for the 'luscious' and 'fondling' expressions to which John Wesley objected, and which, as Leigh Hunt sardonically observed, attracted a 'rapturous' female following.⁴⁷

In her description of the typical Methodist revival meeting, Diane Lobody asserts how Methodist discourse was characterised by a distinctively feminine sensibility.

Over and over again, with almost ritual intonation, we hear the language of tender and uncontrollable emotionalism –the language of women's nature and behaviour. Preachers and believers felt and wept, trembled and groaned;

⁴⁵ Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists*, pp. 42-5.

⁴⁶ Southey, *Life of Wesley*, II, 191.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Folly and Danger of Methodism*, p. 525.

persons melted and softened and sank into God; hearts were ‘tendered’ and filled and comforted.⁴⁸

The language and behaviour expresses a submissive pliability traditionally identified with women. However, it was adopted by the male as well as the female Methodist enthusiast in a way which, for its critics, demonstrated the movement’s emasculating influence. A ‘feminine’ sensibility is similarly evident in the conversion testimonies of such as George Shadford in 1762. ‘Immediately my eyes flowed with tears and my heart with love’, he recounted. ‘Tears of love and joy ran mingled down my cheeks’.⁴⁹ Enthusiastic discourse commonly employed the ‘sentimental “feminine” markers of tears and groans mapped onto parts of the body such as the heart, eyes and breast’.⁵⁰ In his study of Wesley’s language, George Lawton is at pains to stress the ‘manliness and robustness’, ‘freshness and virility’ of his vocabulary, and Davie its evidence of ‘strong, muscular thought’.⁵¹

The willing self-relinquishment suggested in the melting responses of the revivalist meeting might seem opposed to the ‘masculine’ assertiveness which Methodism supposedly encouraged. However, devotion to a reformist creed that involved abandoning socially sanctioned ties and loyalties was in itself an independent, even subversive statement. For critics of the revivalist creed there was an assertive presumption in its claim to a personal relationship with God or divine favour: Johnson’s ‘vain belief in private revelation’. The twin Wesleyan

⁴⁸ Lobody, “‘That Language might be given me’”, p. 14

⁴⁹ George Shadford, *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, 4th edn by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1871), VI, 150.

⁵⁰ Brycchan Carey, ‘John Wesley’s *Thoughts Upon Slavery* and the Language of the Heart’, *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85:2-3 (2003), 269-284 (p. 283).

⁵¹ Lawton, *John Wesley’s English*, p. 19, 98; D. Davie, *The 18th Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 54.

doctrines of atonement: the acceptance of Christ's saving grace, and the possibilities of human perfectibility, would seem to demand abasement while licensing individual agency. This represented the problematic paradox at the heart of enthusiastic discourse: the simultaneous arrogance and internal puritanical pressure for self-examination, the 'melting', and the revitalisation implicit in the concept of renewal. It is a paradox acknowledged by Phyllis Mack who describes a religious person's 'experience of agency (as) one of docility and subsequent empowerment'. She suggests that it was partly through reflections on the nature of agency that Methodism changed from 'a renewal movement on the fringes of Anglicanism into a modern, independent, world-wide church'.⁵²

The fact that the testimony of the male Methodist was often as likely to employ affective and sensual language as that of his female counterpart would seem to support the view that popular Methodism had a feminising influence. In view of the fact that male supporters of female preachers were readily denounced as 'enthusiasts of the dangerous sort', it is perhaps unsurprising that by the 1830s in Ireland, male Methodist disciples were driven to conceal their identities by disguising themselves as women to hear the celebrated female evangelist Anne Lutton preach.⁵³ Gender reversal was further demonstrated in the exchange of language traditionally associated with the masculine or feminine, male Methodists often expressing their relationship with God in terms of 'bride' and 'mother', while women were equally inclined to use such

⁵² Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.12.

⁵³ Hempton, *Religion of the People*, p. 184.

martial metaphors as 'battle' and warfare' to describe their spiritual experience.⁵⁴

This liberating and equalising tendency was also socially manifested in the way that the independent organisation of Methodism seemed to license the neglect of domestic and familial responsibilities through the commitment it demanded. Women could also assume the 'masculine' authority of class leaders or even preachers in their own right, a reconstruction of traditional roles which threatened established hierarchies and structures, as some contemporaries observed in alarm: 'Behold the sexes have changed places, the woman is become the head of the man, the men almost all, learn in subjection and the women teach with authority!'⁵⁵ Diane Lobody emphasises how the 'subversive spirituality' of Methodism liberated the female voice by licensing the expression of personal feeling and authorising women's active communicative role within the movement: 'Women were therefore the hearers, the receivers, and the bearers of liberty, just as the preachers were.'⁵⁶ Paul Wesley Chilcote similarly acknowledges women's centrality in his assertion that 'women helped to make the Wesleyan Revival of the eighteenth century one of the most dynamic Christian movements in the history of the church'.⁵⁷ David Hempton goes so far as to declare Methodism 'predominantly a women's movement', in which female membership accounted for more than half of the total.⁵⁸ The capacity of revivalist culture to liberate and empower

⁵⁴ Lobody, "'That Language might be given me'", p. 143.

⁵⁵ Joseph Benson to Robert Empringham, October 1775, MS letter, W.L. Watkinson Collection, The New Room, Bristol.

⁵⁶ Lobody, "'That Language might be given me'", p. 134.

⁵⁷ Chilcote, *Her Own Story*, p. 13

⁵⁸ Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, p. 5.

women will undoubtedly have influenced the establishment mistrust and denigration of its enthusiastic expression.

John Wesley was particularly receptive to the emotional and spiritual responsiveness of women and inclined to be more expansive and confiding in personal correspondence with them. 'I am so immeasurably apt to pour out all my soul into any that loves me', Wesley admitted in a letter to Dorothy Furlly in 1761.⁵⁹ The remark revealed a desire for the sympathetic connectedness which characterised the culture of 'sensibility' and the emotional impulsiveness of Methodism's feminine enthusiasm. The Irish theological writer, Alexander Knox observed:

It is certain that Mr. Wesley had a predilection for the female character; partly because he had a mind ever alive to amiability, and partly from his generally finding in females a quicker and fuller responsiveness to his own ideas of interior piety and affectionate devotion.

Knox acknowledges the 'amiable' feminine attributes to which Wesley's was always affectionately responsive but implicitly criticises the emotional credulity of women which he felt reflected and encouraged Wesley's own 'intellectual frailties' and capacity for self-deception. Wesley's effusive correspondence with women, he suggests, demonstrated an 'enthusiastic' disposition to draw 'confident conclusions from scanty or fallacious premises; his unwarrantable value for sudden revolutions of the mind; his proneness to attribute to the Spirit of God what might more reasonably be resolved into

⁵⁹ Baker, 'Introduction', *Letters I, Works*, XXV, 7.

natural emotions, or illusive impressions.’ Knox’s term ‘effusions’ for this correspondence implies a tendency in Wesley toward emotional and verbal expansiveness remote from the Enlightenment ideal of educated rectitude, and identifies the enthusiasm with an essentially feminine weakness.⁶⁰

Palpitations and heart warming: temperamental tendencies toward enthusiasm in the Wesley brothers

The ‘strange palpitation of the heart’ which Charles Wesley records himself experiencing at his conversion in May 1738 is in significant contrast with the quieter receptiveness suggested in John Wesley’s account of his own heart being ‘strangely warmed’ at the decisive meeting at Aldergate Street.⁶¹

‘Strange palpitation’ is suggestive of anxiety and instability, and hence the unsteady emotional temperature implicit in ‘enthusiasm’. It could also, as Coleridge believed, be a symptom of the pleurisy from which Charles was then recovering and so expressive of a constitution which was both physically and emotionally sensitive.⁶² Although neither man’s choice of language implies a decisively settled conviction, the terms used express contrasting responses to religious experience which reflect fundamental temperamental differences.

Charles was credited with a fervent style of address, the Rev. John Gambould, who met him in Oxford in 1730, referring to the ‘whimsical preacher’s ‘pious extravagancies’, while modern biographer, Henry Rack, considers him to have

⁶⁰ Alexander Knox, appendix to Southey’s *Life of Wesley*, II, 411-12, 424, 432, 433.

⁶¹ *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. by S.T. Kimborough, Jr, and Kenneth Newport (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), I, 106.

⁶² Coleridge, *Marginalia* in Southey, *Life of Wesley* I, 141.

been an 'impassioned and dramatic' preacher.⁶³ Although the first comment refers to a style which may have been modified by age, Charles showed a personal awareness of his highly wrought temperament in a marginal comment on a list of Methodist Conference preachers. With reference to his and John's estimation of character he suggested that 'our Judgement of Persons was owing to our different Tempers, *his all hopes & mine all fears*'.⁶⁴ John Wesley claimed to enjoy an essentially sanguine temperament.⁶⁵

Despite Knox's claim that John would have been an enthusiast 'if he could', despite the lapses in taste and style recorded by observers and his apparent innocent endorsement of 'hysterical' visionary claims, John Wesley rarely exhibited the raptures or the visionary imagination which rendered the typical religious enthusiast both inspiring and threatening. 'While he delighted in the soarings of others,' remarked Knox, 'he himself could not follow them in their flights [...] there was a soundness in his imagination which preserved him, personally, from all contagion of actual fanaticism'.⁶⁶ Knox's remark suggests the attraction of drama for the sober-minded, the envy of the rationalist for the visionary potential of the creative imagination. This is further illustrated in Wesley's comparative observation on his own and his brother's separate strengths: 'In connexion I beat you; but in strong, pointed sentences, you beat me', which suggests a wistful admiration for the affective power of Charles' more poetic eloquence.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley*, by John Telford (1900), Chapter 39.

⁶⁴ Marginal comment on a list of Presidents of the [Methodist] Conference, taken from copies owned by Thomas Marriott and inscribed: 'Hull, 26 June 1790', Jerwood Centre, Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere. The item has recently been published in a facsimile edition.

⁶⁵ Wesley to Ebenezer Blackwell, August 1755, *Letters I*, XXVI, p. 581.

⁶⁶ Knox, Appendix to Southey, *Life of Wesley*, II, 433-34.

⁶⁷ John to Charles Wesley, 27th June, 1766, *Letters IV*, p. 16.

Ironically, in view of Wesley's early reputation as an enthusiast, it may have been this lack of romantic or emotional intensity which induced Coleridge to question the authenticity of Wesley's conversion in Aldergate Street in a marginal response to Southey's biographical account of the event.⁶⁸ Coleridge stated his opinion that 'Wesley never rose above the region of logic and strong volition.[...]The moment an idea presents itself to him, his understanding intervenes to eclipse it, and he substitutes a conception by some process of deduction'.⁶⁹ Coleridge imputed to Wesley the self-deceptive strategy which might also have been true of his own scientific rationalisations of spiritual ecstasy. In its rejection of a purely cerebral comprehension of truth, Coleridge's criticism nevertheless acknowledged the need for personal emotional conviction in the spiritual or philosophic quest. In his natural distaste for enthusiastic excess, it seems doubtful that Coleridge would demand a more fervent testimony from Wesley, but he was clearly not convinced by the depth of his experience. Maybe the comparative understatement of Wesley's description of his heart being 'strangely warmed' did not, for Coleridge, adequately express the powerful significance of this experience of renewal, though the restraint of the language might seem more sincere than graphic exaggeration. There is some contradiction in Coleridge's more general view of Wesley's emotional suggestibility and controlling intellect. Coleridge suggested a tendency in Wesley to either extreme rather than a balanced combination of what would constitute 'good' enthusiasm – passion disciplined by reason. He was nevertheless more inclined to emphasise Wesley's

⁶⁸ Coleridge, *Marginalia* in Southey, *Life of Wesley*, pp. 141-42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

rationality, admiring his capacity to regulate, by his own disciplined example and practice, the 'absurd' enthusiasms of some of his disciples.⁷⁰

John Wesley would certainly have rejected Coleridge's suggestion that his post Aldergate faith was cerebral rather than emotional, however. 'I know', he wrote to William Law, when severely contrasting his enlightened state with his former correct piety, 'that I had not faith unless that faith of a devil, the faith of Judas, that speculative, notional, airy shadow, which lives in the head, not in the heart'.⁷¹ He was more emotionally susceptible and responsive than he may have cared to acknowledge, or his more sober posthumous reputation suggests. His Journal and personal letters - especially, as we have seen, those addressed to women - were distinguished by the natural language of affection he employed to record familiar human experience. Words like 'affectionate' and 'love' occur on almost every page of his letters.⁷² The emotional confidences of his personal letters do not suggest an emotionally repressed character but rather one who recognised the need to restrain any impetuous tendencies and preserve a decorous public identity.

In a letter to Sarah Crosby John Wesley explained how he could be misinterpreted. He related the surprise of a person he met that he was:

so little affected, at things that would make me run mad. But now I see it is God's doing. If you felt these things as many do, you would be quite incapable of the work to which you are called [...] and perhaps the very temper and behaviour which you blame is one great means whereby I am

⁷⁰ *The Watchman*, 13, ed. by Lewis Patton, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

⁷¹ Letter to William Law, May 14th, 1738, *Letters 1, Works*, XXV, 540-42 (p. 541).

⁷² Baker, 'Introduction', *Letters 1, Works*, XXV, 7.

capacitated for carrying on that work [...] The wants I feel within are to God and my own soul; and to others only so far as I choose to tell them.⁷³

John's enthusiasm was sociable rather than inspired by solitary reflection, and so best manifested in company and correspondence. It was an enthusiasm which was alert and positive and not naturally inclined to melancholy. As such, it could be seen to have derived from the essentially communicative energy of the Dissenting tradition in contrast with the maudlin kind of Methodist enthusiasm derided by later critics Hazlitt and Hunt.

Melancholy anxiety of the kind suffered by contemporary Methodist poet, William Cowper, was a negative extreme of enthusiastic expression from which John Wesley personally distanced himself despite his personal experiences of doubt and even despair in the earlier stages of his ministry. While being receptive to sometimes extravagant religious testimonies of love and joy, John Wesley was quick to correct those more expressive of sorrow and fear, the emotions which Leigh Hunt was later to claim were routinely provoked by Methodist pulpit rhetoric. For Wesley, sorrow and fear represented a false witness to the faith which aspired to the blessed state of 'happiness and holiness.'⁷⁴ In his own increasingly serene composure, John Wesley supplied both an inspiring example and an exacting standard for the average questing disciple of Methodism, and Charles's poetic articulation of spiritual struggle may often have proved more accessible and invited a closer identification than consistently positive affirmation. Charles' written admission

⁷³ Wesley to Sarah Crosby, Sept. 12, 1766, *Letters*, IV, pp.25-7.

⁷⁴ See, for example, John Wesley's letter to Ann Granville, 1731, *Letters*, I, *Works*, XXV, 386.

of emotional struggle anticipated the soul-searching self-examination of poetic Romanticism in which expressions of loss and despair alternated with those of inspired celebration. Poetic Romanticism was to make similar use of the forceful and personal language of the heart to which such intense experience gave rise.

The complex and often painful reality of the spiritual journey is honestly acknowledged and forcefully expressed in hymn lyrics which admitted and sometimes challengingly interrogated the Almighty. In his selection and organisation of Charles's hymns, John also acknowledged the authenticity of the doubts experienced in a believer's progression to assurance through the process of sanctification. Hymns charting this experience were collected under the heading: 'For Believers Fighting', where the wording suggests both the conflict of the spiritual pilgrimage and the guidance the hymns were designed to supply. Such hymns employed the dramatic device of exclamatory rhetoric used in the sermons but with the heightened impact of poetry's metrical compression and the resonance of their musical setting.

Peace! Doubting heart; my God's I am !

Who form'd me man, forbids my fear:

Still nigh me, O my Saviour, stand!

And guard in fierce temptation's hour...

I own his power, accept the sign

And shout to prove the Saviour mine ⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *A Collection of Hymns*, ed. by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), *Works*, VII, 406.

“Courage!” your Captain cries,
Who all your toils forknew;
“Toil ye shall have ; yet all despise,
I have o’ercome for you.”⁷⁶

The acute sensibility of the palpitating heart reminds us how enthusiasm potentially incorporated the extremes of joy and pain as a source both of creative power and vulnerability. This was a vulnerability from which John Wesley’s more sanguine temperament and natural habits of moderation and control protected him. Although he might have regretted his temperamental incapacity to experience the extremes of enthusiasm, his more practical administrative gifts supplied the stabilising antidote to the enthusiastic visionary flight and imparted an authority which helped to establish the more serious longer term reputation of the Methodist movement. Richard Brantley’s remark that Wesley’s ‘love of all Christian thought steadied the momentum of his Methodism’ implies that his alertness to ideas conferred a stabilising objectivity to balance the subjective emphasis of his religion of the heart.⁷⁷

The Hymns: their emotional inspiration

Although the elder Wesley was apparently as capable of ‘passionate melodramatic exclamation’ as coolly rational exposition in his public

⁷⁶ *Hymns*, no. 268, *Works*, VII, 413, l. 37-40.

⁷⁷ Brantley, *Method of English Romanticism*, p.3.

addresses, Methodism's religion of the heart is more readily associated with the powerful emotional appeals of the hymns of Charles than with the exhortations of the habitually neat and perspicuous John. With the unique capacity of poetry to engage the mind, heart and imagination, Charles' inspirational hymns might be felt to enforce this message more powerfully than the taut prose of John's sermons. The latter's 'Preface' to the Methodist *Hymns* nevertheless acknowledged the vital energy which their inspirational quality contributed to worship and to the movement as a whole. For John, the collected hymns supplied the most persuasive vehicle for the transmission of faith, the strengthening of individual commitment and the unifying of the faithful. They were seen as giving 'wings to the doctrines of the evangelical revival'.⁷⁸ He therefore encouraged and expanded their use in worship, prompting the assertion that Methodism was 'born in song'.⁷⁹ Thomas Langford and Clifford Longley similarly regard the hymns as the inspirational heart of the Methodist movement, the latter describing Wesleyanism, in its simplest sense, as 'a choir founded by John to sing the hymns of Charles and to live accordingly. This is its heart, its spirituality'.⁸⁰ In a common sense of the spiritual origins of poetic inspiration, although with an essentially doctrinal emphasis, Charles Wesley would no doubt have corroborated Wordsworth's assertion that 'poetry is nearest to its divine origins when it administers the comforts and breathes the spirit of religion'.⁸¹ Significantly it was Charles' conversion which gave birth to his lyric gift, illustrating the commonly perceived relationship between

⁷⁸ J.E. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941), p. 37-38, cited by van Noppen, p. 57.

⁷⁹ Preface to the *Methodist Hymnbook*, 1933.

⁸⁰ Clifford Longley, *The Times*, 29th February, 1988, quoted in Turner, p.52.

⁸¹ Wordsworth, 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' (1813), *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, I, ed. by W. J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.64.

poetic and religious inspiration. Although sceptics may see it as a contrived coincidence, the fact that the event occurred on Whit Sunday further identifies enthusiastic revelation with the communicative power conferred by the scriptural gift of tongues.

As poetry put to music, the hymns achieved a popular accessibility and so functioned as ‘the ordinary man’s theology’, a perception which may explain the historical denigration of their literary value.⁸² As such, the hymns possessed the democratising power implied in John Turner’s reference to them as ‘the folk music of the church militant’.⁸³ They also challenged the social and ecclesiastical hierarchy in their appeal to the experience of personal salvation and the self-assertion this encouraged. The simple emotional force of their language also liberated the inner voice and raised the inarticulate private experience of the unregarded masses to the level of public proclamation. No doubt owing to its popular appeal, however, the enthusiastic rhetorical style of Charles’ evangelism would seem to have undermined his literary reputation and the limited extent to which his hymns have since been anthologised. The relative paucity of modern commentary on Charles Wesley’s writings (to which Teresa Berger testifies) may well reflect the way in which their reputation was adversely affected by their association with popular enthusiast culture.⁸⁴ This fact indicates a derogatory estimation of Charles as a “mere evangelist” and a suspicious response to the language of the heart which his

⁸² George Sampson, ‘A Century of Divine Songs’, The Warton Lecture on English Poetry, 1943, quoted in *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, ed. by Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), X, in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, p. 181.

⁸³ Turner, *The Evangelical Revival*, p. 52.

⁸⁴ Teresa Berger, ‘Charles Wesley: A Literary Overview’, *Charles Wesley, Poet and Theologian*, ed. by S.T. Kimborough, Jr (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 21-29.

hymns represented.⁸⁵ Donald Davie considers Charles Wesley to have been less successful in restraining the emotional intensities of his lyrics than Presbyterian divine Isaac Watts, whom Davie praises for successfully adapting the language of his hymns for a common auditory without sacrificing style or dignity.⁸⁶

Studies of the hymns of Methodism have emphasised the strong simplicity of the poetic diction and the way in which it seemed to mark a break with formal lyric convention. Some of the hymns nevertheless also exhibit more elevated Latinate diction and the visionary grandeur of Miltonic metaphor in which Charles would seem to diverge from his brother's more severe stylistic criteria. Displaying a capacity for innovative synthesis which characterised Methodist culture, the 'rich literary metaphor' of the hymns' to which van Noppen alludes is counterbalanced by lexis of muscular force and simplicity.⁸⁷ This is likely to have derived from John and Charles's familiarity with the figurative power of German hymnody as well as the Hebraic poetic tradition.⁸⁸ Favouring a more accessible language and form, Charles emulated the simple strength of Hebraic metaphor in metrical variants on the ballad. Wordsworth was to employ similar stylistic and communicative principles, with a similar respect for Hebraic rhythms, in his individual adaptation of the metre in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Charles' hymns nevertheless display some of the characteristics associated with the popular enthusiastic style. Chief amongst these are the emphatic, rhetorical exclamations and interrogatives typical of popular pulpit discourse and illustrated in such lines as:

⁸⁵ Oliver A. Beckerlegge, 'Charles Wesley's Poetical Corpus', *ibid.*, pp. 30-44 (p. 31-2).

⁸⁶ Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 53.

⁸⁷ Van Noppen, *Transforming Words*, p. 64.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diest for me!

[...]

Where shall my wond'ring soul begin? ⁸⁹

The declamatory written style of some lines replicate the intonation and emphasis of the oral mode in its exclamatory punctuation, italics and capitalisation.

O that every thought and word

Might proclaim how good thou art

HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD

Still be written on our heart ⁹⁰

Charles Wesley would seem to have felt the need to invest the line with more rhetorical force than the static medium of print allowed.

The energy of the sung hymns consisted in the force of lexis and rhythm which demanded reciprocal engagement and exhibited the irresistible communicative imperative of sincere enthusiasm:

See how great a flame aspires

Kindled by a spark of grace

Jesu's love the nation fires

Sets the kingdom on a blaze ⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 29, p. 116, l.1.

⁹⁰ Charles Wesley, 1st printing, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: Farley, 1745), pp. 118, l.13-6.

The expansive, infectious, capacity of enthusiasm is well illustrated by the scripturally traditional fire imagery denoting redemptive power. In view of the supposedly inflammatory tendency of enthusiastic expression, Charles' metaphor for scriptural energy and inspiration seems apposite. Fiery metaphors dramatised the incendiary impact of Methodist revivalism, as in a contemporary memoir by Jonathan Saville which describes how the visiting Methodist preacher might initially produce 'a little moving among the dry bones' of indifference in close-knit working communities; but shortly afterwards, 'the fire broke out; and it was just as when the whins on a common are set on fire, - it blazed gloriously'.⁹² While the affirmative exclamations of the hymns provided a passionate declaration of faith amounting to a shout of celebration, the rhetorical interrogatives reflected the emotional challenge and sometimes anguished introspection which the spiritual journey involved. The personal testimonies also displayed the common independent stance of a humility combined with an assertiveness which sought direct communion with sublime mystery.

The highly personalised language of Charles' hymns emphasised the individual experience of a religion which relied on the inward evidence of personal revelation. As van Noppen implies in his reference to the singer of the hymns as an 'I' relating to a 'Thou', the language of the hymns is distinguished by the emphatic, repetitive use of the personal pronoun:

Jesu, my Advocate above,

⁹¹ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 209, p. 341, l. 1-4.

⁹² F. A. West, *Memoirs of Jonathan Saville* (Halifax, 1844), quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1991edn.), pp. 418-19.

My friend before the throne of love;
If now for me prevails thy prayer
[...]
Hear, and my weak petitions join,
Almighty Advocate, to thine.⁹³

The hymns express this sense of an intimate, even familiar relationship with God in the use of dialogue or more challenging address, including the imperatives of exhortation. This quality is powerfully demonstrated in the urgent imperatives of 'Wrestling Jacob'.

Tell me thy name and tell me now!

Wrestling, I will not let thee go
Till I thy name and nature know..

Yield to me now; for I am weak
[...]
Speak or thou never hence shall move
And tell me if thy name is Love.⁹⁴

This conversational expression of intimate communion with the divine was seen as one of the presumptuous characteristics of popular evangelism.

⁹³ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 97, p. 202, 1-3, 7-8.

⁹⁴ 'Wrestling Jacob', *ibid.*, no. 136, p. 250-52, 1.12, 17-18, 1.31, 35-6.

The technical method of the hymns

Charles may be viewed as the inspired heart which pumped the energy of the Methodist movement while John supplied its rational foundation. Together, the brothers achieved some of the balance between reason and emotion for which John Wesley aimed, and which for him assured the integrity of the experience and authority of the message. Rejecting the conventional polarization of Classical and Romantic literary expression, parodied by Northrop Frye as 'reptilian Classicism and mammalian Romanticism', Wesley editor James Dale argues that the poetic diction of Charles Wesley's *Hymns* successfully unites the disciplined restraint of classicism with the emotional power commonly associated with Romanticism.⁹⁵

John Wesley's enthusiastic approval of the literary style in a passage from Pope's 'Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady', which he quotes from memory, was applied with equal conviction to the language of his brother's hymns. 'Here is style! How clear, how pure, proper, strong! [...] This crowns all; no stiffness, no hard words; no *apparent* art, no affectation; all is natural, and therefore consummately beautiful. Go thou and *write* likewise'.⁹⁶ Such stylistic features represent the best of the Augustan school: 'clarity, purity, strength, an easy naturalness.' Charles Wesley's own stylistic preferences would have been shaped by this school which 'deplored the incoherent expression of violent emotion', although it did not reject emotion as such.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ James Dale, 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 43.

⁹⁶ Wesley to Furlly, July 15, 1764, *Letters*, IV, p. 43.

⁹⁷ Dale, 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 43.

While their allegiance to the wisdom of the heart associated them with the values of Romanticism, the Wesley brothers inherited the literary principles of the Augustan school. The way in which the Methodist Wesleys and later writers like Wordsworth combined experiential, emotional criteria with the rational principles associated with classicism illustrated a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of enthusiastic qualities.

Kenneth Shields suggests that Charles found the technical demands of poetic composition a valuable way of disciplining the feelings which might otherwise threaten to overwhelm him.⁹⁸ He would have understood Wordsworth's insistence on the need for a reflective ordering of the spontaneous emotional response. The metrical constraints of poetic composition inevitably involved a critical detachment, while at the same time serving to concentrate and intensify the recollected emotional experience. The whole process of poetic composition then becomes an intellectual exercise which can rationalize emotional excitement and communicate it in an intelligible and acceptable form. Charles' hymns demonstrate the balance of fine judgement informed by emotion and gain strength from their disciplined metrical compression of powerful sentiment.⁹⁹

The forceful directness of Charles's best hymns was a quality which Wordsworth was to identify with emotional integrity and felt to be necessary for effective poetic communication. The robust plainness which makes emphatic use of familiar lexis, repetition, and conversational structures has the rhetorical force typical of the pulpit oratory which critics complained that

⁹⁸ Kenneth Shields, 'Charles Wesley as Poet', in *Charles Wesley, Poet and Theologian*, pp. 45-71 (p.65).

⁹⁹ Dale, 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 43.

Wordsworth and Coleridge employed. The Methodist hymn fulfilled the important function of collectively engaging listeners in an emotional experience. This function is powerfully displayed in Charles Wesley's famous hymn of personal conversion:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in my Saviour's blood
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, should'st die for me?¹⁰⁰

As a religious poem, the language has a directness and force which engages the reader. The connective '*And*' with which it opens immediately arrests attention with an immediacy which suggests a continuing line of personal thought or dialogue and involves us in the writer's personal experience of assurance. The rhetorical questions express the self-interrogation associated with the inner religious quest and echo the incredulity of wonder. The hymn displays several of the defining characteristics of enthusiasm both in its original classic sense and in its more pejorative interpretation. It expresses the intensely felt personal experience of being overwhelmed by a divine presence and energy which has a transforming impact. As such it implies a kind of divine possession. Yet it does not suggest the losing self, or being 'out of one's mind'

¹⁰⁰ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 193, p. 322, l.1-6.

negatively perceived as madness and loss of control. The expressions of ecstasy are allied with an acute, heightened awareness of self in relation to the divine emphasised in the recurrent use of the first person subject and object pronouns. The believer gains a simultaneous sense of personal renewal and dependence on a higher authority. It expresses the intimacy of this relationship and perhaps a possessive presumption: 'An interest in *my* saviour's blood', to which critics of enthusiastic 'new birth' claims objected. The language has a sublime elevation and yet none of the mystical verbosity to which Jeffrey objected. It possesses instead what John Wesley would consider the integrity of plainness in its simple vigour and preference for the familiar – even in the almost prosaic analogy of financial transaction, powerful in its dramatic juxtaposition with 'blood':

And can it be that I should gain

An interest in my saviour's blood

Charles Wesley favoured monosyllabic lexis over Latinate: 'pain', 'blood', 'death', 'love', and this, combined with anastrophe in lines like: 'Died he for me, who caused his pain', has a rhetorical impact rather than ornamental elegance, with the foregrounding of words of key emotive or scriptural significance. It is an example not of banality, but of dignified plainness. The pared down language of Wesley's conversion hymn enforces the message and sentiment of awe. The lines combine an assertive expression of spiritual identity with new humility. Prominent in the hymn are the rhetorical question and exclamatories which impart the conversational directness felt to distinguish

pulpit oratory. As such, it demonstrates the connection explored by Classical rhetoricians between personal and collective experience in which the irresistible energy of the enthusiast invites imaginative participation in the feelings expressed. This process is facilitated through an interconnecting current of energy: 'Just as the god communicates to the poet his ability to communicate, the poet communicates to the rhetor this ability to communicate, and the rhetor communicates to his auditors this "enthusiasm"'.¹⁰¹ Turner affirms the communicative impetus of Charles's experiential theology in his statement that Charles's hymns were 'based on his own experience of redemption and his passionate desire to share it'.¹⁰² This interpretation of the enthusiastic style encapsulates a central paradox: the intense individuality of independent emotional experience associated with the solitary contemplative, and the instinct to communicate that emotion sociably.

Rhythm is an important element of poetry's emotional impact. The musical intelligence of Charles Wesley is expressed in an inventive variety of metres which can arrest and powerfully engage the listener. He makes effective use of the iambic tetrameter in this example, with a caesura in the first line.

And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in my saviour's blood

This has the effect of emphasizing the significance of final words such as 'gain' and 'blood' and demanding engagement. The breathless rhythm has an

¹⁰¹ Peter Fenves, 'The Scale of Enthusiasm', *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe*, p 117.

¹⁰² Turner, *The Evangelical Revival*, p. 55.

emotional pressure and urgency which implicitly challenges both comfortable iambic harmonies and expectation.

In an inventive use of lexis and metre, Charles Wesley demonstrates his awareness of how such stylistic and technical components influence the emotional impact of his verse. Sensitivity to the effects of rhythm obviously involves a musical sensitivity which is a particularly important aspect of hymns that are designed to be forcibly communicated and shared through this medium. In addition to the inherent musicality of rhythm, the musical *settings* of the Wesley hymns crucially contributed to their accessibility, the sensory appeal of melody, cadence and rhythm enhancing the emotional and rational force of the message. It was a fact acknowledged by John in his insistence that tunes should be 'singable, teachable, memorable, functional and accessible'.¹⁰³ Tunes of simple strength were invariably favoured for this purpose. As Wordsworth also argued later, the harmony achieved through these auditory components could both artistically heighten and ameliorate the painful impact of references to human struggle and suffering.

¹⁰³ Young, 'Music of the Heart', p. 113, cited in Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, p. 70.

John's editorship of the hymns: embarrassment with bodily metaphor

John Wesley's editing of the hymns crucially contributed to the regulatory process which intensified their communicative force by culling their excesses. His deletion of lines and verses and thematic devotional organisation of the hymns imposed on them a discipline and order they may otherwise have lacked. In Shields' opinion, 'Few of Charles' original, unedited hymns have the force and sharpness that poetry at its best requires.'¹⁰⁴ John also objected to the 'peculiar vocabulary' of extreme revivalist discourse compounded of Scriptural phrases 'wrenched out of their context', which insulted the integrity of their scriptural source.¹⁰⁵ Metaphor, with its biblical precedent, was valued for the way it made scriptural truth more forcibly accessible to the unlearned and was felt to contribute significantly to the power of Charles's verse, but only, in John's opinion, where it met the criteria of appropriateness and dignity.

Wesley's habitual use of sensory language and metaphor to express spiritual experience powerfully communicated the reality of experiences like the New Birth to his less educated listeners:

Only men of a strong and clear understanding can be sensible of its full force. On the contrary, how plain and simple is this; and how level to the

¹⁰⁴ Shields, 'Charles Wesley as Poet', p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ Lyles, *Methodism Mocked*, p. 62.

lowest capacity! Is not this the sum; 'One thing I know; I was blind, but now I see'.¹⁰⁶

And Charles similarly articulates spiritual perception in sensory terms,

The seeing eye, the feeling sense

The mystic joys of penitence.¹⁰⁷

Applying traditional, polite criteria of literary taste, Kenneth Shields suggests that Charles seemed not to know when to cut or discard and seemed 'insensitive to serious lapses in taste'.¹⁰⁸ This, he suggests, may have resulted from the spontaneous compositional method which was the source both of its creative power and its weaknesses – a criticism not uncommonly applied to the extempore enthusiastic discourse of pulpit evangelism. John's editorial method was guided by a preference for modest restraint over language he considered presumptuous in its artificial inflation or affectionate intimacy. He was therefore critically alert not just to luxurious and distracting ornamental features but to some of the incongruous associations of figurative language in hymns by Charles now considered less accessible or successful. Alongside Charles's choice of such robust verbs as 'rush', 'trample', 'snatch', 'shout' are sensuous expressions like 'languishing' and 'rapture', with their erotic connotations.

¹⁰⁶ (cf. John 9:25), *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. by Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols (London: Robert Culley, 1909), Jackson, X:75-76, cited in Brantley, *Method of English Romanticism*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁷ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 9, p. 92, l. 27-28.

¹⁰⁸ Shields, 'Charles Wesley as Poet', p. 59.

Charles' hymns have nevertheless invited contrasting responses from modern critics. Countering the popular perception of the sensuality of Methodist discourse, Kenneth Shields, for example, argues that Charles 'draws too much from the more abstract language of the New Testament and not enough from the narratives and rich sensuous language of the Hebrew scriptures.' He compares this relative restraint unfavourably with the hymn by Isaac Watts: 'Christ Hath a Garden Walled Around', which powerfully applied such language. He suggests that Charles would, like his brother, have been uncomfortable with the erotic metaphor of the *Song of Songs*. The remark implies that, to some extent, Charles lacked the poetic power one might expect from the lyric evangelist. Shields nevertheless acknowledges the 'great strength' of Charles's 'Wrestling Jacob' which in its metaphor of the spiritual struggle has a muscular power and combative energy very different from the luxurious imagery and tender union lyrically rendered in the Song of Solomon.¹⁰⁹

Averse to any 'coarse' anthropomorphism or 'fondling' sentimentality, John Wesley claimed that, in his editing of his brother's hymns, he had 'taken care to pare off every improper word or expression, every one that may seem to border on a familiarity which does not so well suit the mouth of a worm of the earth when addressing himself to the God of heaven'.¹¹⁰ It is a scruple which reflects the problem with the 'sensuous incarnation' of the sublime which Wesley, as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge, later acknowledged. While dependent on physical analogy for spiritual truth, Wesley was wary of the deceptive or imaginatively inflammatory capacity of explicit bodily metaphor.

¹⁰⁹ Shields, 'Charles Wesley as Poet', p. 67.

¹¹⁰ John Wesley, 'On Knowing Christ after the Flesh', *Sermons IV*, ed. by Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), *Works*, IV, 98-106 (p.101).

A generally disparaging association of religious enthusiasm with the feminine may have influenced Wesley's discomfort with the use of sensuous language metaphorically evoking female biology and relationships. This was the intimate physicality of metaphors with overtly nuptial or maternal (lactation and parturition) connotations, as in:

Our God ever blest
With oxen doth rest
Is nurst by his creatures
And hangs at his breast ¹¹¹

Wesley rejected language not so much of feminine sensibility but of effeminate sentimentality, echoing Shaftesbury's disparagement of 'nambipambical writing about a meek and gentle Jesus'. ¹¹² Shaftesbury, who also deplored unmanly representations of a 'lank, snivelling - and Popish - Jesus' had accused women, 'along with quietists, pietists and those who favour the ecstatic way of devotion' of encouraging this 'softer expression of religion'. ¹¹³ John may have considered such language to undermine the intellectual authority of the movement while expressing the presumptuous intimacy with the divine for which the religious enthusiast was commonly accused. At the same time, the traditionally feminine attributes of tenderness and humility

¹¹¹ Charles Wesley, *Hymns for the nativity of Our Lord*, ed. by John Wesley (London, 1744), *Hymns and Psalms: a Methodist and Ecumenical Hymnbook* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), p.101.

¹¹² John R. Tyson, ed. *Charles Wesley: a reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Phyllis Mack, p. 54.

¹¹³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, II, 6.

promoted within the contemporary discourse of moral sensibility were necessarily central to the language of religious devotion.

John's style of devotion was essentially spirited and affirmative, however, and he was inclined to delete from his brother's hymns any expression of sentiment he considered unduly maudlin or abject such as:

My sore disease, my desp'rate sin

To thee I mournfully confess.¹¹⁴

The frequently occurring metaphor of blood in the hymns has an obvious figurative relationship to Christian sacrifice and to the heart as a source of feeling and vitality. However, in such lines as 'For those that trample on thy blood' and 'His streaming feet, transfix'd and torn', it was graphically applied in a way that was offensive to those who objected to the over-explicit lushness of enthusiastic style or to those who considered its sensory impact inappropriate for its doctrinal purpose.¹¹⁵ John Wesley's injunction to preachers to avoid bawling out clichés about 'the blood' implies a torrid overuse of the metaphor. For critics like Bishop Lavington, such imagery also recalled the sensuous iconography of Catholicism with the graphic bodily metaphors employed for the transports of the faithful.¹¹⁶ John Wesley and Lavington at least shared a sensitivity to the breach in tasteful restraint which such language seemed to represent.

¹¹⁴ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 385, p. 559, l. 25-6.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 23, p. 108, l. 32, no. 24, p. 110, l. 23.

¹¹⁶ Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd*, pp. 54-59.

It is nevertheless necessary to remember that physical analogy we might now find surprisingly basic was quite acceptable in eighteenth century devotional language. 'Bowels', for example, was a common metaphor for compassion and a source of feeling:

'Can you doubt that God is love?

If to all his bowels move?

and:

'Thy bowels yearned, and sounded 'Live!'¹¹⁷

For Wesley, an appropriate or dignified choice of language was a matter of taste. This was the taste of the mature discrimination to which he appealed in his Introduction to the *Hymns*: 'I desire men of taste to judge'.¹¹⁸ It was a taste which observed the aesthetic Enlightenment precepts of decorous restraint, but also, in accordance with the new 'taste' which Wordsworth later aimed to develop in readers of his *Lyrical Ballads*, an emotional instinct for truth. In each case this taste rejected the indulgent excess negatively associated with enthusiastic religious discourse in favour of a modest but dignified transparency.

¹¹⁷ *Hymns, Works*, VII, no. 8, p. 90, l.25-6, no. 198, p. 329, l.10.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Preface', p. 74.

Conclusion

I have examined the communicative method of John and Charles Wesley within the context of eighteenth century rationalism, and considered how stylistic technique would have been influenced by the communicative objectives of the Methodist mission, by the personal priorities of its practitioners, and by cultural pressure. These pressures could be seen to consist in an endorsement of sensibility countered by an equivalent deference to the rational restraint considered necessary to regulate emotional indulgence or excess. This prompted the Wesley brothers to adopt various strategies, crucial to Methodism's evangelical purpose, to achieve a discourse that was both emotionally persuasive and rationally sound. This purpose was achieved through a strong but simple pulpit rhetoric, structural precision, and the metrical discipline of the hymns. I have considered how these aims may have been complicated by the Wesley brothers' different and sometimes conflicting personal dispositions toward rational restraint or emotional expansiveness.

John and Charles Wesley, in common with Wordsworth later, favoured a plain style over superficial elegance for its qualities of clarity and truthfulness. John Wesley's concern to avoid coarser colloquialisms or overtly sensuous metaphor nevertheless preserved certain principles of propriety and maintained a cultural distance from the common man whom the Methodist field preacher directly addressed and Wordsworth later sought to represent. In contrast with the essentially literary and philosophical emphasis of Wordsworth's poetic enterprise, however, the more urgent, evangelical purpose of Wesleyan religious mission required the dynamic, interactive medium of the sermon and

the congregational hymn which demanded the rhetorical features of emphasis, exaggeration and repetition and an interrogative style. These, in their theatrical assertiveness and projection, invited charges of enthusiasm and a consequently reductive historical and literary assessment of the value of Charles' hymns and the Methodist mission as a whole.

I have analysed the tension resulting from a simultaneous promotion of, and embarrassment with, the feminine attributes of sensibility associated with enthusiasm. The positive expression of this sensibility was the sensitive receptiveness equally valued by Enlightenment and Romantic discourse; its negative extreme was the irrational emotionalism with which the language and religion of the heart were persistently identified. A concern to avoid being associated with the latter induced John Wesley and later Wordsworth, to try, with variable success, to mitigate any tendencies toward a luxurious or demonstrative style.

In my attempt to show how Methodist discourse and practice may have indirectly influenced and anticipated Wordsworth's poetic method and philosophy, I shall go on, in the next chapter, to assess the likely impact of Methodist culture in the poet's early life and education.

Chapter 3

Wordsworth's early exposure to Methodist enthusiasm

Despite Wordsworth's imaginative receptivity to the numinous, scholars have long been challenged to define an explicit religious position in the poetry produced before 1815, still less to identify any denominational allegiance.¹ Wordsworth's reliance on an emotional revelation of spiritual truth might nevertheless implicitly identify him with 'the religion of the heart' which John Wesley promoted in his eighteenth-century mission to revitalise the established church. In this chapter I shall discuss what Wordsworth's individual spiritual vision may have owed to the cultural influence of evangelism and to Methodism in particular. I shall consider Wordsworth's likely exposure to Methodist itinerancy within the context of his childhood, his university education and early poetic career, and assess, from the evidence of written and spoken responses, his receptivity to its discourse.

Religious sympathies in Wordsworth's early poetry

In the 'radical years' of 1793 – 1798, Wordsworth apparently rejected institutional religion and the prospect of a career in the Anglican ministry, confessing in an earlier letter to William Mathews, 'I cannot bow down my

¹ See Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon

mind to take orders'.² He sought temporary refuge from disillusionment in William Godwin's atheistic political creed which elevated pure reason over feeling as the only needful guide to benevolent action, and consequently to political stability. In the 1790s, Wordsworth's radical political sympathies made him receptive to Godwin's liberal humanitarian philosophy and to the independent stance of Dissenting religious sects. It is significant that his earliest work should have been published by the political radical and Unitarian, Joseph Johnson. Johnson was interested in the 'radical credentials' of a writer recently returned from revolutionary France. Besides Godwin, he had published the work of other radical thinkers and Dissenters such as John Aikin, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and William Enfield, as well as the Methodist poet William Cowper. Wordsworth's verse was originally designed for the radical contingent of Rational Dissenters in an educated readership.

Wordsworth was eventually to judge Godwin's rationalist atheistic creed as untenable, and also increasingly distanced himself from Rational Dissent through disillusionment with the cerebral, speculative nature of Unitarianism. It was his scepticism of formal Rational Dissenting creeds rather than of Christianity more generally which may have prompted Coleridge's description of him in 1796, as 'at least a *Semi-atheist*'.³ In *The Christian Wordsworth*, William Ulmer claims that Wordsworth maintained a faith in the concept of a presiding deity throughout this period.⁴ Wordsworth's essentially religious sensibility found congenial expression in the philosophical theory of the One

² Wordsworth to Mathew Williams, February 17th, 1794, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years 1787- 1805*, I, ed. by E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, rev. by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, repr. 2000), p.112.

³ Coleridge to John Thelwall, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), I, pp. 215-16.

⁴ Ulmer, *The Christian Wordsworth*, pp. 16-17.

Life, introduced to him by Coleridge. This proposed the concept of an indwelling, unifying spirit that, as he famously expresses it in 'Lines Composed above Tintern Abbey': 'impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought,/ And rolls through all things'.⁵ There is a Christian perspective in the way this universal harmonising spirit is deified as the moral agency of love and consequent source of good and joy in Wordsworth's poetry from this period, but the poet's reluctance to identify with any formal system is simultaneously demonstrated in the reservations which undercut the poem's most confident assertions. The affirmative:

While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
We see into the life of things.

Is succeeded by:

If this be but a vain belief – yet how oft -
[...]
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!⁶

Rather than subscribe to a definitive creed, Wordsworth preferred to trust the evidence of personal emotional conviction and connection, significantly, with

⁵ 'Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey' (1798), *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 117-118, l. 101-103.

⁶ *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), pp. 117- 8, l. 48-58.

the image of the freely wandering River Wye. This might be felt to accord with the experiential and affective emphasis of John Wesley's Methodist evangelism. Sharing a general scholarly reluctance to identify Wordsworth with the evangelistic culture disparaged by educated opinion, Ulmer instead attributes the cautious self-distancing suggested in Wordsworth's, 'If this be but a vain belief', to 'a wariness of religious enthusiasm' which he 'shared' with his social milieu. A contrary interpretation of the emphasis of Wordsworth's statement might read it less as a socially inflected embarrassment than as a somewhat anxious defence of the capacity of emotional revelation to challenge rational doubt or rationally authoritative creeds.

In view of the comparative focus of this study, it seems significant that Ulmer should compare this apparent evidence of Wordsworth's wariness with the concern of 'the great Wesley himself' to justify and authorise experiential claims in his Methodist mission: 'For all his emphasis on justification by faith', he observed, the latter 'never allow(ed) experience to stand alone'.⁷ Although Ulmer's choice of evidence might be open to dispute, his comparison nevertheless registers the similar complexity of Wordsworth and John Wesley's perception of the relationship of faith to feeling and reason. In this comparative perspective, Wordsworth and John Wesley could be seen to occupy a cultural continuum in which the conflicting precepts of eighteenth-century rationalism and a more affective 'Romantic' ideology are engaged in critical dialogue. This was a dialogue which, in its simplest sense, attempted to achieve equilibrium in an effort to reconcile the competing claims of head and

⁷ G. R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 161.

heart. In their persistent Anglican loyalties, both Wordsworth and Wesley might be considered to have subscribed to a form of 'Romantic Anglicanism', to use Ulmer's phrase.⁸

While acknowledging Wordsworth's receptivity to an inward and mystical experience of religious truth, Ulmer declares that 'there is no evidence that the Evangelical Revival ever influenced him deeply'. Modifying Richard Brantley's designation of Wordsworth as an Evangelical Anglican, Ulmer's *Romantic* Anglican label conveys the spiritual individualism that combines respect for orthodox tradition with the 'epiphanic, exploratory and emotional in religious experience'.⁹ While accepting the contrary tendencies of Wordsworth's religious temperament and outlook, and agreeing that there is no evidence of any explicit allegiance to evangelistic creeds on Wordsworth's part, I would suggest that poems like *The Prelude* show more emotional affinity with the revelatory inspiration of evangelical culture than with formal orthodoxy, or with secular pantheism. I would also be inclined to interpret his traditional Anglican loyalties at this stage more as the counteractive corrective instinct of the educated mind to regulate enthusiastic excess, an instinct shared with John Wesley. For both, these contradictory tendencies were a source of the tension that activated the debate surrounding enthusiasm.

I shall explore Wordsworth's affinity with John Wesley's Methodism by comparing the two men's commitment to authentic religious experience and the ambivalence they both betrayed in attempts to harmonise the claims of reason and emotion: the precepts of Enlightenment culture and the inner light. I shall now consider how Wordsworth might have absorbed evangelical, and

⁸ Ulmer, *Christian Wordsworth*, p. 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23.

specifically Methodist influences in the context of his early life and education and to what degree it may be felt to have influenced his spiritual and moral perspective.

Methodist influences in Wordsworth's early life and education

Wordsworth's home region of Cumberland was a particular focus for the early missions of the Quakers and other Dissenting sects. John Wesley certainly concentrated much of his ministry in the industrial or rural north of the country and the many Methodist chapels remaining in Cumbria and the Lake District testify to its enduring influence. The only existing official membership figures for the year 1815 record the enrolment of 102 Methodists at Penrith and 309 at Kendal.¹⁰ Of special significance for this study is the fact that John Wesley made a particularly strong impression on the people of Wordsworth's home town of Cockermouth, on the North West edge of Cumbria, visiting the town five times during Wordsworth's boyhood in the period 1770-1778, and eighteen times over a thirty three year period, during which time Wordsworth maintained his connection with the town.¹¹

The fame Wesley had achieved by as early as 1751 attracted 'a large and serious congregation' in the Cumbrian town. Two years later, he could claim, no doubt with some exaggeration, that he 'preached to well-nigh all the inhabitants of the town'. He addressed a 'listening multitude on Whit Sunday

¹⁰ Maldwyn Edwards, *After Wesley: A Study of the Social and Political Influence of Methodists in the Middle Period (1791-1849)* (London: Epworth Press, 1935), p. 172.

¹¹ Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, pp. 5, 16, 18.

in 1757, and in June 1777, a 'large congregation waiting in the castle-yard'.¹² By this time, when Wordsworth was seven years old, large audiences regularly assembled to hear Wesley's preaching. Since, according to William Wilberforce, the town boasted only one main street, and John Wesley was likely to have chosen a central public space for his meetings, it is most probable that the young Wordsworth, whose prominent family home fronted the street, would have seen, or at least heard Wesley and his followers.¹³ The singing or exhortations of public worship may have been a fairly familiar background to Wordsworth's early life. In view of the young William's likely exposure to such meetings, it seems significant that the audience apparently consisted of all social ranks. According to Wesley, 'high and low, rich and poor, attended' in a sympathetic spirit, with 'by far the greater part of the audience [...] conscious that God was there'.¹⁴ The curious and receptive young Wordsworth is unlikely to have been unaffected by a cultural milieu infected with the excitement of eighteenth-century revivalism.

If Wordsworth was indeed exposed, as seems likely, to the influence of Methodist evangelism, the form of Methodism with which he would have been familiar was John and Charles Wesley's inclusive Arminianism influenced by the Lutheran conviction that God's grace is accessible to all who are receptive, regardless of class, race or gender. As John Wesley expressed it in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777):

¹² April 17th, 1751, *Journals III (1743-54)*, ed. by Reginald Ward (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), Works, XX, 384; Sun 15th April, 1753, *ibid.*, p. 452; Whit Sunday, May 29th, 1757, *Journals IV*, Works, XXI, 104; Tues., 3rd June, *Journals VI*, ed. by Ward (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), Works, XXIII, 53.

¹³ William Wilberforce, cited, Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁴ Sun 20th May, 1759, *Journals IV*, XXI, 193.

The historical evidence of revelation, strong and clear as it is, is cognisable by men of learning alone; but this is plain, simple and level to the lowest capacity. The sum is, 'One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see': an argument of which a peasant, a woman, a child may feel all the force. The traditional evidence gives an account of what was transacted far away and long ago. The inward evidence is ultimately present to all persons, at all time, and in all places.¹⁵

Wordsworth similarly challenged discriminatory assumptions in his decision to celebrate the value and integrity of humble experience in his early ballad verse. As he explains in his 'Preface' to *The Lyrical Ballads*, 'Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity'.¹⁶ This choice is illustrated by the narrative of *Peter Bell*, in which the simple message of a Methodist itinerant finds a path to the heart of the renegade hero.

Evangelical influence persisted in the milieu of Wordsworth's undergraduate studies at Cambridge, a town which had acquired a historical reputation for religious toleration and its capacity to 'pour forth Evangelical students [...] copiously', as Reverend Richard Polwhele observed with concern in 1820.¹⁷ This was a cultural climate shaped by the powerful influence of Charles Simeon of Holy Trinity, a figure considered only third in importance to Wesley and Whitefield among evangelical leaders. Wordsworth was exposed there not just to political radicalism but to the Great Awakening of the religious

¹⁵ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Classics, 2007), p. 129.

¹⁶ 'Preface', *The Lyrical Ballads* (1800), I, 124. [All further references to the Preface of the *Lyrical Ballads* will be to the 1800 edition, unless otherwise stated].

¹⁷ Richard Polwhele (London, 1820), p. 288.

revival which, despite the intellectual languor of academic life, vitalised the general community as well as the student population. The university entrance examination in which Wordsworth was ranked in the top half of his class had included questions on the 'The Evidences of Christianity' (1738), by Philip Doddridge, the 'Congregational herald' of the religious revival.¹⁸ It is interesting that Wordsworth should have numbered evangelicals amongst his most intimate associates at St. John's College. They included John Gisborne, who was there converted to Methodism, and William Mathews, the son of a Methodist preacher, with whom Wordsworth corresponded for five years, from 1791-96, after leaving Cambridge. Wordsworth also planned literary projects with Mathews, designed, in a revivalist spirit, to offer moral enlightenment. 'I know that the multitude walk in darkness', he told him, 'I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him.'¹⁹ In *The Radical Years*, Nicholas Roe interprets the enlightenment which Wordsworth intended to provide the poor 'benighted people of Britain' as strictly political, rather than religious.²⁰ The adapted quotation from Isaiah nevertheless has the distinct resonance of scriptural prophecy and suggests that Wordsworth at least saw the relevance of religious metaphor for his own missionary purpose.

Methodist influences in Wordsworth's writings

Charles Lamb's sense of the 'Natural Methodism' in Wordsworth's *Excursion* suggested the poet's perhaps unconscious empathy with the spirit and style of its evangelical creed. Despite this, overt references to Methodism are

¹⁸ Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Wordsworth to Mathews, [8th] June [1794], *Letters, Early Years*, p. 125.

²⁰ Nicholas Roe: *Wordsworth and Coleridge the Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

conspicuously absent from Wordsworth's writings, which may be in itself revealing. This contrasts with the much fuller later reflections of literary contemporaries like Coleridge and Southey on the style and creed of Methodism, especially in the latter's biography of the founder and Coleridge's marginal dialogue with the author and the text. The fact that Wordsworth's library contained a copy of Robert Southey's biography may nevertheless indicate an interest in the subject independent of Wordsworth's friendship with Southey, and there is evidence to suggest this in some of his writings.²¹

In his 1843 notes to Isabella Fenwick recording the contextual stimuli and influences on his poems, it is perhaps significant that Wordsworth felt the need to clarify the inspiration for the two elements of *Peter Bell* which had provoked controversy, its flirtation with the supernatural surreal, and the more socially authentic use of Methodism as a vehicle for the hero's reclamation. To justify his possibly controversial use of the sect as a moral agency, Wordsworth recorded positive memories of hearing open air Methodist which had prompted its dramatic adaptation in the poem:

The worship of the Methodists or Ranters is often heard during the stillness of the summer evening in the country with affecting accompaniments of rural beauty. In both the psalmody and voice of the preacher there is, not infrequently, much solemnity likely to impress the feelings of the rudest characters under favourable circumstances.²²

²¹ *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue*, Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), p. 243.

²² *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared Curtis, 1st edn (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p. 71.

The description gives a tranquil impression of open-air worship in harmony with its natural surroundings which is at odds with the popularly negative image of strident Methodist evangelism. This suggests that the memory might derive from the early childhood experience of general contentment and receptiveness to nature. The image may, as a consequence, have been softened by the distance of nostalgic recollection, but the positive impression persisted despite his firmer allegiance to the established church at the time of writing, in 1843. Wordsworth's use of the expression 'ranters' for the Methodist worshippers, although an accepted label for the 'primitive' expression of post Wesleyan Methodist revivalism, evokes a more fanatical enthusiasm, and in his use of the term, Wordsworth apparently accepted the derogatory designation of the declamatory enthusiastic style. He was also distancing himself from the creed and its humbler adherents in his reference to this style of worship being calculated to impress the 'rudest characters' in a suitably congenial context.

Yet Wordsworth's description of the open-air meeting also respectfully acknowledged the solemn conviction of this devotion while appreciating the persuasive combination of voice timbre, words and music. Ever receptive to the emotional resonance of natural sounds and to the musical properties of poetic rhythm and metre, it is not surprising that Wordsworth should have responded favourably to the hymn-singing of Methodist worship that characterised the movement and, in contrast with Quaker worship, made it audibly familiar. That Wordsworth enjoyed hymn-singing in Christian worship is shown in one of his letters to Sir George Beaumont, in which he admitted to

having been (together with Sara Hutchinson) 'pleased with the singing' by the Anglican congregation at Coleorton.²³

This positive impression of Methodism nevertheless contrasts with Wordsworth's disparaging reference to the creed in a letter of 1806 to Francis Wrangham on the issue of Catholic Emancipation. Although Wordsworth had been invigorated by the liberating theology of Wrangham's *Thirteen Practical Sermons*, he did not share his support of the Catholic cause, which he negatively equated with Methodism: 'With the Methodists on one side and the Catholics on the other,' he declared, 'what is to become of the poor church and people of England, to both of which I am most tenderly attached?' Methodism and Catholicism are regarded here as equally subversive extremes which threaten the rational stability, authority and membership of the established church. Together they seem to represent the dangerous enthusiasm which according to Bishop Lavington, consisted in a joint appeal to the senses and emotion, and possessed the power to corrupt the national identity enshrined in Anglican orthodoxy. The sentimental terms in which Wordsworth describes his 'tender' attachment to the Anglican establishment along with an affectionate reference to the 'pretty little spire' of his local church, seems to reflect more traditional protectionist sentiments not usually associated with the politically independent Wordsworth of this time.²⁴ One cannot ascribe this view to the increasing conservatism of Wordsworth's old age, since the letter dates from the same period in which he was preparing *Peter Bell*, with its more respectful treatment of Methodism as a redemptive agent. Here, both Methodism and

²³ Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont, Nov. 10th, 1806, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by de Selincourt, 2nd edn, *The Middle Years, 1806-1811*, rev. by Mary Moorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, repr. 2000), part 1, p. 94.

²⁴ Wordsworth to Francis Wrangham, March 1809, *Middle Years*, p. 313.

Catholicism are generalised as creeds rather than respected as individual stimuli to genuine faith. This sense of Methodism as a subversive force echoes the standard disparagement of Dorothy Wordsworth's reference, in a later letter to Christopher Wordsworth of October 1828, to the ongoing 'warfare with the Methodists' – by then outside the Anglican Church - which her brother John faced in his parish in Whitwick.²⁵ Like Wesley, Wordsworth, despite his shifting political and religious allegiances, retained a residual loyalty to the stable traditions of the established church through most of his life.

The missionary itinerancy which characterised Methodism would nevertheless appear from the evidence of poems like *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* to have had a particular fascination for Wordsworth who found his spiritual and emotional home in the open air and was most receptive to sublime mystery in that context. Its early personal appeal is shown in a letter he wrote to the Rev. Francis Wrangham in 1796, in which he admitted having 'thoughts of exploring the country westward of us....but in a humble evangelical way: to wit 'a pied''.²⁶ Of course, this also characterised the pedestrian character of the Lakes-based Romanticism, where constant movement out of doors was as crucial a creative and intellectual stimulus for poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge as for John Wesley, who composed many of his sermons on the 250,000 miles he was estimated to have covered on horseback in the course of his preaching career.

The suggestion of open-air ministry is somehow implicit in the natural and solitary sources of Wordsworth's spiritual inspiration and may have invited

²⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth to Christopher Wordsworth Jnr, Monday 21st October 1828, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years, 1821–1828*, part I, ed. by Alan G. Hill from 1st edn by E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 639

²⁶ Wordsworth to Francis Wrangham, March 7th [1796], *Early Years*, p.168.

Lamb's natural Methodist label. Various lines from Wordsworth's poetry suggest his self-characterisation as a priest of nature, in the quasi-fictional figure of the Wanderer in his 1814 poem *The Excursion*, and in Book I of the autobiographical *Prelude* where he ascribes his first experience of joy to the spiritual influence of nature.

To the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and cloth'd in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services.²⁷

Although this solitary and natural communion shows the influence of Rousseauesque philosophy, Wordsworth's self-representation has a distinctly religious resonance. It also seems significant that this quasi-religious authority confers a communicative power which emphasises the relationship of inspiration to expression. It accords with the extempore style of popular evangelism which in turn recalls the scriptural precedent of the gift of tongues. The linguistic fluency described here is nevertheless more the inspired monologue of individual communion than the communal mission that characterised Methodist evangelism. The monologue is also suggestive of the madness of the eccentric solitary who had either rejected, or cannot be accommodated within existing social structures. Certainly the reference to

²⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude, The Thirteen Book Prelude*, ed. by Mark L. Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 14, l. 59-63.

‘prophecy’, ‘clothed in priestly robe’ and ‘spirit singled out’ is redolent of the more dangerous enthusiastic stereotype of the deluded visionary.

In the first book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth certainly expresses a strong sense of missionary zeal and purpose for greater achievement in his expression of the urgent ‘longing’ which ‘in me rose/To brace myself to some determined aim’ (p. 16, l. 123-124). He continues to express his commitment to a libertarian ethos which characterised Wesley’s spiritual theology if not his politics.

So like a Peasant I pursued my road
Beneath the evening sun; nor had one wish
Again to bend the Sabbath of that time
To a servile yoke.

(p. 16, l. 110-113)

This expression of a naturally earnest piety unconstrained by a formal doctrinal framework might again seem to justify the label of Natural Methodist.

Wordsworth’s admission to having no wish ‘to bend the Sabbath of that time to a servile yoke’ expressed a defiant rejection of formal boundaries and conferred on his youthful freedom an independent sanctity which did not accord with Wesley’s more orthodox sabbatarian practices and pieties.

Wordsworth’s romantically idealised self-characterisation as a ‘Peasant’ potentially shades into the spectres of destitute vagrancy which haunt the ballad narratives. The implicit challenges and more troubling resonances of the philosopher itinerant suggest, as David Riede argues in *Oracles and Hierophants*, that Wordsworth’s response to the wandering life was more complex and ambivalent than might at first be assumed.

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth employs the reflective language of self-examination which demonstrates the paradoxical combination of humility and self-assertion of Puritan tradition. Wordsworth's poetic practice and theory demonstrate a keen sense of the relationship of simple and forceful expression to emotional truth. This emphasis on the need for transparency was also endorsed by Wesley in his careful distinction between a genuine, enthusiastic conviction and false and empty protestation. Certainly there was in both men a respect for the genre of spiritual autobiography which it represented, supplied also by the personal Christian journey of the Methodist *Hymns*, and a receptiveness to the personal and emphatic language which it encouraged. Most important was Wordsworth's undoubted commitment to the 'religion of the heart' which relied on the internal evidence of emotional, rather than purely rational, conviction.

Although one can understand that the younger Wordsworth, in his rejection of formal religion, would have been more receptive to the Methodist faith in the wisdom of the heart, remarks made in his more conservative maturity expressed a similar preference. Henry Crabb Robinson, for example, related how Wordsworth expressed a strong dislike for the cerebral coldness of Unitarianism:

He could not feel for the Unitarians in any way. Their religion allows no room for imagination, and satisfies none of the cravings of the soul. 'I can feel more sympathy with the orthodox believer who needs a Redeemer, and who, sensible of his own demerits, flies for refuge to Him (though perhaps I

do not want one for myself) than the cold and rational notions of the Unitarian.'²⁸

The view which Wordsworth expressed may be another example of the increasingly affective emphasis which marked his disillusioned frustration with the pedantry of the atheistic Godwinian rationalism he had embraced in his youth, and a corresponding distancing from rationally Dissenting creeds. Allowing for the possible inaccuracies of retrospective transcription, the language which Crabb Robinson applies to Wordsworth: 'craving of the soul', 'flies for refuge', expresses the emotional urgency and intimacy of evangelical discourse. In *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, Brantley remarks on the 'pervasive Evangelical idiom' of such phrases as 'the indwelling spirit', 'the Christ in us', 'perfection' etc., which express the concepts of spiritual renewal central to religious revivalism.²⁹ Such language is applied to the revelatory character of Wordsworth's transformative 'Spots of Time' experiences, recorded in the early books of *The Prelude*, which express in similarly visionary terms the inspiring and chastening impact of spiritual power. Wordsworth's later angry response to criticism of *The Excursion* further revealed his impatience with the cerebral scepticism of Unitarian critics and his reactive endorsement of an emotional expression and experience of faith. 'One of the main objects of the Recluse is, to reduce the calculating understanding to its proper level amongst the human faculties', he asserted, 'therefore my Book must be disliked by the Unitarians, as their religion rests entirely on this basis,

²⁸ Henry Crabb Robinson, incl. quoted comment by Wordsworth, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1938), I, 87.

²⁹ Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, xi and Ch. 3.

and therefore is no religion at all'.³⁰ He continued to resist pressure to decisively define his religious position in an insistence on the need for a more fundamental, general, spiritual connectedness.

However, in Wordsworth's parenthetical qualification: 'though perhaps I do not want one' [a personal Redeemer] 'for myself', there is an implicit tension between instinctive emotional sympathy and a more cautious self-distancing. This could indicate a reluctance on the poet's part to admit to the Unitarian Robinson his need for divine salvation or a basic reluctance to acknowledge personal need; in either case, a self-consciousness seems to intervene to forestall too intimate an identification with the personal, inward religion so accessible to the lower classes. Ironically, however, Robinson may once himself have been receptive to the concept of a personal redeemer. As a youth in 1790 he heard John Wesley address a large gathering in Colchester. In a letter to his brother Thomas, he admitted being moved 'to the heart' by the elderly preacher's ardent message, and responded to him with 'a respect bordering upon enthusiasm'.³¹ Robinson seems to have felt the pressure of an emotional excitement he was later to restrain within the rational framework of Unitarianism but it may explain his easy and sympathetic use of the emotional terms of evangelical discourse when recording Wordsworth's remarks. It remains true, however, that Wordsworth's religious creed, like that of John Wesley, remained within the secure doctrinal framework of Anglican orthodoxy, although their communicative style and purpose exhibited the 'zealous didacticism' which characterised popular evangelism. So although Wordsworth did not express an explicit allegiance to Methodism, he shared

³⁰ Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, Jan 1815, *Letters, The Middle Years*, part II, p. 189.

³¹ Oct. 18th, 1790, *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. by Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1869), I, 19-20.

Wesley's commitment to the language of the heart insofar as this was the plain expression of honest emotion. As such, he implicitly endorsed both the spirit and style of enthusiasm.

Conclusion

While Wordsworth may have had no known allegiance to Methodism, it is quite possible that his spiritual and missionary intensity was influenced by the moral and cultural climate of evangelism in his early years in Cumbria and later in Cambridge, with particular exposure to Methodism through Wesley's frequent visits to his home town of Cockermouth. My brief references to *Peter Bell* and *The Prelude* suggest the likely appeal, for Wordsworth, of such features of Methodist evangelism as field preaching and itinerancy.

Although Wordsworth was to develop a more orthodox Anglican position in his maturity, he always resisted doctrinal rigidity, and remained more temperamentally attuned to a spiritual sublime or Hebraic mysteriousness which eschewed dogmatic certainties. The visionary mysticism of Wordsworth's imagination was combined with an increasing loyalty to the institution, if not all the tenets, of Anglicanism, in what Ulmer defines as Romantic Anglicanism. The 'Romantic' component suggests the independent mystical experience which lay outside the boundaries of formal Anglicanism or Dissent, and bore a resemblance to the more personal and inward inspiration of evangelicalism.

In his own youthful wanderings, Wordsworth was motivated by a spiritual idealism and impatience of convention not dissimilar to that of early Methodist

evangelists. The exploratory and personal nature of his youthful quest for self-fulfilment was nevertheless very different from John Wesley's disciplined focus and altruistic purpose, being more expressive of youthful idealism than mature commitment. At the same time, Wordsworth's use of Methodism as a redemptive vehicle in *Peter Bell* showed his awareness of Methodism's powerful influence on the humble classes of society. The fact that Wordsworth's personal library later contained a copy of Taylor's *The Natural History of Enthusiasm and Fanaticism* indicates a persistent interest in the culture of enthusiasm.³² His own distinctively moral vision, with its sensitivity to the concept of the everyday workings of grace, may well also have owed something to the zeal and austerity of puritan evangelism. My survey has at least served to illustrate a shift in Wordsworth's intellectual and moral sympathies from a rationalist deistic position to a more affective enthusiastic stance.

In the following chapter I intend to illustrate the ideological affinity between Wordsworth and John Wesley by examining how their affective ideals were demonstrated in their literary theory and communicative practice. This will involve discussing the aims and principles outlined by John Wesley in his 'Preface' to the Methodist *Hymns* of 1779, and considering how far they might have anticipated those of Wordsworth in his 'Preface' and 'Supplementary Essay' to *The Lyrical Ballads* twenty one years later.

³² Isaac Taylor, *The Natural History of Enthusiasm and Fanaticism* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1830 and 1833), *Wordsworth's Library, Transactions of the Wordsworth Society*, 6 (10th May, 1884), p. 224.

Chapter 4

Common missions in Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *The Lyrical Ballads* and John Wesley's 'Preface' to the Methodist *Hymns*

I intend in this chapter to bring together the views and practice of Wesley and Wordsworth, so far considered separately, in order to emphasise what I believe to be an affinity in the moral and literary objectives of the two men. I provide a comparative analysis of the defences of their poetic method with reference to John Wesley's 1779 'Preface' to *A Collection of Hymns for the use of People called Methodists*, and Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *The Lyrical Ballads*. The hymn collection is made up of hymns largely by John's brother, Charles, with a number by himself and a few from other devotional lyricists like Isaac Watts. Wordsworth's 'Preface' was appended to the 1800 edition of the *Ballads*, with amendments in successive reprintings. My discussion will also draw on Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of 1815, although the more explicitly religious emphasis of this later addition to the Preface will be given separate consideration later in the chapter.¹

Although there is no record of Wordsworth having read the Preface written by John Wesley just twenty years before his edited collection of *Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* has a similar emphasis and aim. Indeed, the mission to

¹ John Wesley, 'Preface', *Hymns*, (1779), *Works*, VII, 73-75; Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815'.

revitalise poetry which Wordsworth outlines in his preface partook of the same morally revivalist spirit as the evangelical movement, dominated by Methodism, which energised religion from the late 1730s. Both men claim a 'worthy *purpose*', and intend the poetry to fulfil a sacred kind of '*duty*'.² Wesley's aim is naturally more doctrinally specific than Wordsworth's broadly moral design, his new, more comprehensive collection of hymns being designed to make generally accessible 'all the most important truths of our most holy religion'.³

However, Wesley and Wordsworth equally acknowledge the influential power of *language* as 'the medium through which the heart is to be affected', and in their joint insistence on the morally elevating function of true poetry, attempt to dignify and rationalise the language of the heart. Each is anxious to prevent it being conflated with the vulgar enthusiastic style.⁴ In his definition of poetry, Wesley shares with Wordsworth values of plainness which are both ethical and aesthetic. The two prefaces offer precise, and in Wordsworth's case, extended definitions of poetry which are clarified and elaborated in the 'Supplementary Essay' of 1815 and further prefaces. These definitions clearly distinguish between shallow and derivative verse and the poetry of genuine inspiration that uplifts and enlightens by engaging the deeper levels of the heart and mind. For both Wordsworth and Wesley, the authenticity of the latter is expressed in a purity of sentiment and style which requires a reader with a taste uncorrupted by a fashionable preference for stylistic affectation.

In their differently angled prefaces, Wesley and Wordsworth each emphasise the inspirational origin of poetry, although Wesley locates this

² 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 744; 'Essay', p. 63.

³ 'Preface', *Hymns*, *Works*, VII, 73.

⁴ 'Essay', p. 82.

strictly in religious experience. In his 1800 'Preface', Wordsworth accepts that poetry springs from powerful, if not divinely inspired, sentiment. However, in his later 'Supplementary Essay', despite its essentially literary focus, Wordsworth increasingly represents this feeling as spiritual or religious in character. At the same time, unlike Wesley, he disclaims any educative doctrinal purpose. The sense of religious and moral authority in Wordsworth's collection was acknowledged in an appreciative letter sent to him by John Wilson in May 1802, in which the writer admitted to valuing the *Lyrical Ballads* 'next to my Bible' and described poetry as exciting 'the sympathies of our souls'.⁵

In the unstable political climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was a suspicion of any democratising, libertarian philosophy, and Wesley and Wordsworth needed, in their different contexts, to defend their positions and social sympathies. They both separately claim to have submitted, reluctantly, to pressure from friends to make the voice of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the Methodist *Hymns* more widely heard and understood, which indicates the challenge each was perceived to represent. 'For many years', declares Wesley, in his Introduction to the *Hymns*, 'I have been importuned to publish such a hymn-book as might be generally used in all our congregations throughout Great Britain and Ireland'. The pressure to publish implies a widespread demand for the messages the hymns contained and the language in which they were communicated. At the same time, Wesley acknowledges the 'experimental' character of its primary appeal to individual

⁵ John Wilson to William Wordsworth, May 1802, *Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads: A Casebook*, ed. by Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (Oxford: Macmillan, 1971, repr. 1984), pp. 58-63 (p. 61).

and inward experience. This echoes the affective and experiential emphasis of Wordsworth's challenging new poetic.⁶

Wordsworth describes the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* as a similar response to pressure from friends, in his case, for the theoretical clarification of a method which might otherwise be misinterpreted or disparaged. He implicitly acknowledges his reluctance to persuade rational readers to accept a vision and a voice designed to convince the heart rather than the critical intellect: 'I was unwilling to undertake the task [...] since I might be suspected of having been influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of reasoning him into an approbation of these particular poems'.⁷ The writers' initial reluctance to comply with the pressure suggests a private faith in the capacity of the works they are presenting to the public to speak for themselves and the self-sufficiency of the existing form. This assurance is reinforced in Wesley's injunction to anyone who presumes to be able to improve on the hymns, to 'print them just as they are' [...] and 'not attempt to mend them [...] for none is able to mend either the sense or the verse'.⁸ Unlike Wordsworth, however, whose work was designed for an educated readership, Wesley was receptive to the social argument that his hymns needed to be made more practically accessible to the 'poor', who were 'not able to purchase so many books', and to simplify the choice for those currently 'bewildered in the immense variety'.⁹ Such concerns reflect the more pragmatic criteria that characterises the style and argument of Wesley's 'Preface'.

⁶ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 73-4.

⁷ 'Preface' *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 742.

⁸ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 75.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 75, 73.

Both Wesley and Wordsworth nevertheless recognised the potentially broad influence of the creeds which they promoted, and their decisions were informed by what could be considered a righteous conviction and sense of missionary commitment to the moral and spiritual imperatives they enshrined. As Wordsworth expressed it:

Several of my friends are anxious for the success of these Poems, from a belief that, if the views with which they were composed were indeed realised, a class of poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the quality, and in the multiplicity of its moral relations.

In referring to his 'Preface' as a 'defence', Wordsworth acknowledges the challenging and potentially contentious nature of poems 'so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed'. Both he and Wesley were persuaded to address or anticipate the criticism of those for whom the earnestness of their message or force of their language might be unfamiliar and unwelcome. Wordsworth was aware that, as a poet, he might be seen as breaking some sort of contractual arrangement founded on accepted practice: 'It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association'.¹⁰ In its place he nevertheless aimed to forge a moral contract which involved a reconnection with self and one's essential humanity, avoiding the errors which resulted from ignoring this connection. Wesley's collection

¹⁰ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 742.

served the different but related function of a spiritual covenant through which worshippers might renew their commitment and relationship with God. As such, both the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Hymns* represented an opportunity for a reconnection with a genuine wisdom of the heart remote from empty protestation or performance.

The central commitment to truth which governed Wesley and Wordsworth's communicative theory and practice was emphatically asserted. Truth of sentiment and experience is expressed in the words 'real' and 'common', in its sense both of universal and essential. Wordsworth emphasises how his new poetic aims to reproduce the 'very language of men' within the context of the natural environment where 'beautiful and permanent forms' represent enduring symbols of our natural origins and identity.¹¹ With a more specifically scriptural emphasis, John Wesley insists on the way that the hymns communicate 'true' religion and the true feelings they inspire. *The Collection of Hymns*, he claims, is 'large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical'.¹² The hymns can be seen to reinforce the declared aim of the four volumes of Sermons, to 'demonstrate the essentials of *true* religion', to 'describe the *true*, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a *real* part thereof' (my italics).¹³ With relation to religion, 'true' here denotes not just essential religious tenets, but the faith of inward conviction and its plain and unambiguous expression. This truth was the evidence of experience, the knowledge it produced, and the natural, heartfelt language which this inspired.

¹¹ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 743-44.

¹² 'Preface' *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74

¹³ Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p. 220, cited in *Hymns, Works*, VII, 56.

It is the truth of a native closeness to the land, or to the life of the spirit which 'speaks a plainer, more emphatic language' or the 'plain, practical word of God' unmediated by form or convention.¹⁴ Such language does not seek to draw attention to itself, but to the moral or religious truths it illuminates, and is designed to appeal to a similar integrity in the reader.

Despite encouraging a spirit of humility, Wesley and Wordsworth's bold claims to truth inevitably gave rise to charges of righteous didacticism from religious or literary critics in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. William Hazlitt, for example, condemned what he considered the self-righteousness of the Methodist, while critics Leigh Hunt and Francis Jeffrey, suspicious of enthusiastic agenda, criticised as undignified and insincere Wordsworth's pulpit 'preachments' or 'Methodist' morality. Wordsworth and Wesley's reformatory claims for their verse challenged contemporary perceptions of the essentially recreational function of poetry. Wordsworth disparaged those readers who see poetry as 'no more than a matter of amusement and idle pleasure', while Wesley rejected poetry which appealed to a superficial taste for the empty flourishes of 'words without meaning'.¹⁵ Both directed their message, instead, to readers, in Wesley's words, of 'real judgement'.¹⁶

This ideal reader may be required to exercise a native wisdom and discernment. 'I desire men of taste to judge', declared Wesley, '(these are the only competent judges) whether there be not in some of the following hymns the true spirit of poetry'. As Wesley uses it, 'taste' implies an instinctual, common-sense capacity to distinguish affected sentiment from 'the

¹⁴ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

¹⁵ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), p. 751; 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

¹⁶ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

unostentatious beauties of a pure style'.¹⁷ For Wordsworth, an effective connection with a text demanded the same, but may also require the more laborious cultivation of a taste which has been corrupted by the worldly values of contemporary fashion. 'Every author', he argued, 'as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.' Wesley and Wordsworth both recognised that exercising this discernment involved both reader and writer in, as Wordsworth expressed it, 'breaking the bonds of custom, and in overcoming the prejudices of false refinement'.¹⁸

Wesley and Wordsworth each appealed to a faculty of moral discrimination very different from the unthinking taste of polite conformity. For both, 'false refinement' consisted in a fashionable preference for style at the expense of meaning, and a desire to distract and entertain rather than challenge. This was an art of mere performance or artifice which demanded nothing of its reader. Wesley, like Wordsworth, made no concession to style or fashion at the expense of meaning, which is never compromised accordingly: 'In these hymns there is no doggerel; no botches; nothing put in to patch up the rhyme'.¹⁹ Wordsworth similarly deplored the corrupted taste of those mature readers who have allowed themselves to be 'beguiled into admiration of absurdities, extravagancies and misplaced ornaments'.²⁰ Wesley credited the hymn lyrics with a confidence and courage in their own integrity and purpose, believing them to ring with the energy and conviction of a genuine inspiration. He rejected the empty flourishes and declarations associated with false

¹⁷ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

¹⁸ 'Essay', pp. 64, 80.

¹⁹ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

²⁰ 'Essay', p. 64.

enthusiasm, dissociating himself from its inflated rhetoric and those who would accuse him of the same. 'Here is nothing turgid or bombast', he asserted, 'here are no cant expressions [...]. Those who impute this to us know not what they say.' Wordsworth derided popular public opinion and defended his particular view in the same terms when he later declared that those who interpret poetry in a shallow sense 'speak of what they do not understand'.²¹

Wesley and Wordsworth claimed instead the superior dignity and elegance of simplicity: 'Here is both the purity, the strength, and the utmost simplicity and plainness, suited to every capacity.' They placed a similar emphasis on the superior accessibility of plainness. Although both drew on elemental scriptural or natural metaphor, they were equally disparaging of empty, ornamental figures of speech 'pretty compound epithets, as 'pale-eyed, meek-eyed and the like,' which offended their ideal of stylistic purity by contributing nothing to sense or meaning, while deceiving or disarming the judgement.²² Wordsworth shared with Wesley a puritan conviction that he was restoring an original purity of sentiment and language which served the stylistic ideal of simplicity, strength and elegance. These attributes satisfied the criteria of both clarity and beauty and implicitly honoured the traditionally masculine attributes of strength and precision over a luxuriousness that stimulates the senses and emotions without engaging the more discerning intellect.

Wordsworth made the same distinction as Wesley between the expression of sincere and false emotion, rejecting the excitement artificially generated by shallow or sensationalist writing, which offers only 'gross and violent stimulants'. He recognised the artificial nature of the feelings provoked by an

²¹ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, (1802 edn), p. 751.

²² 'Preface', *Hymns*, *Works*, VII, 74-5.

exaggerated style which feeds the unhealthy 'craving for extraordinary incident' encouraged by more sophisticated communication, 'which the hourly communication daily gratifies', and increasingly divorced from the slower rhythms of nature and simple stabilities of human fellowship. Both were critical of a shallow modern taste for novelty and shallow sensation through which we fail to connect with ourselves and more enduring human truths. Literary fashions for 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse' supply a superficial entertainment which serves to distract and titillate rather than engaging heart and mind on a deeper level.²³

The two writers each made a clear distinction between the natural and mechanical poet. Wesley insisted that true poetry 'cannot be acquired by art or labour', but 'is the gift of nature', and therefore the result of the 'true spirit' of a genuine inspiration, a view that shares the affective emphasis of Romantic philosophy.²⁴ This emotional inspiration is famously expressed in Wordsworth's definition of true poetry as the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' in which truth is perceived and experienced internally, 'carried alive into the heart by passion'. The sense of the poet's unique sensibility is further emphasised in Wordsworth's image of him as one 'endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him'.²⁵ He is perceived as one whose work is produced from a state of heightened awareness in which 'ideas are associated 'in a state of excitement', possessing the inner spiritual resources that are not

²³ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 746-47.

²⁴ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

²⁵ 'Preface' *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), p. 751.

dependent on external stimulation.²⁶ Wordsworth aspired to the genuine enthusiasm of inspired connectedness, and through a heightening of the mental and imaginative faculties, a source of energy and creative fluency. In their praise for a genuine poetic inspiration, Wesley and Wordsworth celebrated the energy which it represented. This is the quality of active engagement through a 'quickenings' of heart, mind and senses directly opposed to formulaic verse - making or empty religious practice.²⁷

For Wordsworth, the crucial ingredient for responsive reading was a genuine 'passion' rather than superficial excitement. In its etymological relationship to suffering, this 'passion' denotes a labour that may involve discomfort: 'the connection which Passion has with effort, exertion, and action, is immediate and inseparable'. Serious reading required a more intense and challenging emotional engagement than was supplied by modern verse's appeal to superficial sentiment, the pain implicit in the etymology of 'passion' perhaps consisting in the personal re-evaluation and moral revelations which this kind of reading can involve. Wordsworth's use of the active nouns, 'effort' and 'exertion' emphasises the need for effective reading to be an interactive relationship through the exercise of a 'co-operating power'.²⁸

This reciprocal power is very different from the passivity encouraged by superficially elegant or stimulating verse which does not aim to change the reader's perceptions but simply confirms existing 'prejudices', 'unbending', in the sense of loosening or weakening, rather than exercising the rational faculties.²⁹ Passivity is identified with an idle irresponsibility as well as a

²⁶ 'Preface' *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), p. 745.

²⁷ 'Preface' *Hymns*, *Works*, VII, 75.

²⁸ 'Essay', p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

preference for luxury very different from the strenuous rational and emotional engagement which accords with the more puritan ideal that both Wesley and Wordsworth promoted. They shared the view that poetry, to be worth the name, should engage the reader on a deeper level by appealing to 'the primary laws of our nature', our deepest motivations, and instinctive, rather than taught, knowledge. Such laws, Wordsworth argued, would be 'traced' not 'ostentatiously' or self-consciously, but 'truly' through an art which does not speak its name but fulfils its essential function, to connect and recover our common inheritance of human fellowship.³⁰

Despite their rejection of a cold reason divorced from feeling, John Wesley and Wordsworth insisted that the emotional response must be directed and illuminated by a wise rationality. Their belief in the critically regulating influence of reason, Wesleyan 'common-sense' and Wordsworthian 'good sense', countered any impression of irrational enthusiasm. Summing up Wesley's control over the collection consisting largely of his brother's hymns, Louis Benson describes how he 'planned it, prepared the ground, introduced and fostered it, moulded and administered it, and also restrained its excesses'.³¹ The last clause is revealing in what it suggests of Wesley's persistent sense of the need to regulate the public expression of his religion to preserve its dignity and authority, and accords with the editorial rationale discussed in Chapter 2. John Wesley's commitment to order and clarity was demonstrated also in the systematic arrangement of the hymns on a devotional basis, which he considered a central part of their communicative effectiveness. 'The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads',

³⁰ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 743.

³¹ Benson, cited in 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 56.

according to the experience of 'real' Christians—the adjective again stressing the integrity of the Christian experience it represents and to which it appeals.³²

For Wordsworth and Wesley, both the writing and reading of hymns and poetry should involve the co-operation of the heart and rational intelligence, each complementing the strengths and compensating for the deficiencies of the other. So while both insisted on the need for the emotional connection of initial inspiration, 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling', or 'quickenings the spirit of devotion', they argued equally that, for both writer and reader, this emotional revelation should be succeeded by a process of critical reflection through which the truths intuitively perceived are more thoughtfully assimilated and consolidated.³³ For Wordsworth, the artist's emotional resources have their seat in the 'depths of reason' to which the mind must 'descend by treading the steps of thought'. Wordsworth insisted on the discipline which a mature engagement with a text involved and which he felt to be absent from modern habits of reading in which 'thoughts [...] are little disciplined by the understanding'.³⁴

'Understanding' here implies an emotional, as well as rational conviction of the kind that Wesley celebrated in his conversion in Aldergate Street. A poetry that is reliant for its effect not just on 'organic sensibility', but on the more settled wisdom of, 'one who has thought long and deeply', in Wordsworth's words, demands the meditative pace and patience of an earlier, more devotional era.³⁵ Both Wesley and Wordsworth appealed to a spirit which was uncorrupted by the commercial imperatives of a superficial modernity,

³² 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

³³ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 744; 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 75.

³⁴ 'Essay', pp. 82-3, 63.

³⁵ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 744-45.

recognising that reflective pace and depth was necessary to ensure the enduring, transformative influence for which responsible literature should aim. The writings of both men were designed to engage readers of 'enthusiastic' receptiveness who were, at the same time, 'modest and ingenuous' with the capacity to '*regulate* their sensibility' (my italics) by exercising 'a discreet and sound judgement'.³⁶ Both writers advocated a sensibility moderated by a prudent control which denoted a maturity in contrast with the intemperate raptures of youthful enthusiasm.

Wesley and Wordsworth's explanatory prefaces testified to their concern to make their ideas accessible. Although Wesley applied to his selection and editing of the hymns the practical criteria consistent with his appeal to common sense, he and Wordsworth were equally concerned to speak to the heart of the reader. For Wesley a chief recommendation of the hymns was the way in which their simply forceful language was 'suited to every capacity'.

Wordsworth also aimed for the communicative directness of 'a man speaking to men', although his ballad diction was designed for a more selective, literary readership than Wesley's hymn-singing community. Wordsworth's persistent emphasis on 'common' and commonness, semantically related to communicability, nonetheless expressed his sense of the universal relevance and shared human values which his poetry celebrates and reinforces. Wesley emphasised the importance of physical convenience as well as linguistic accessibility, commending the size and accessible format of the collection. Yet he also placed a philosophical emphasis on the 'smallness' of the wide existing variety of hymns which could never entirely fulfil the boundless desires of the

³⁶ 'Essay', p. 63.

faithful: 'It does not, it cannot, in so narrow a compass, make variety enough'. He acknowledged the enthusiastic energy of the devotional hymn-singing which 'makes so considerable a part of the public service', and credited its powerful capacity for unifying and confirming the faith of believers. He emphasised the moral value of the collected hymns as a public declaration of a united faith, and thus, as with the *Lyrical Ballads*, a vital instrument of change.³⁷

Religious scruples in Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface'

Wordsworth's 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface', published thirteen years after the 1800 'Preface', was markedly more religious in language and tone than the original introduction to the *Ballads*. This more religious frame of reference might indicate Wordsworth's renewed allegiance to Anglicanism by this stage. It could also indicate a desire to enhance further the moral authority of work designed to be influential and instructive. It might also have been, in part, a response to readers who expected doctrinal guidance from the worthy moral purpose that Wordsworth claimed for his verse. The 'Essay' certainly identifies poetry more overtly with religion in its description of poetry as being 'most true to its divine origins when it administers the comforts and breathes the spirit of religion'. In his view, it is 'dependent on the contribution of the Soul, 'without which it languishes and dies'. This would seem to accord with John Wesley's view that 'what is infinitely more important than the spirit of poetry is the spirit of Piety'.³⁸

³⁷ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74, 73.

³⁸ 'Essay', p. 64; 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 75.

While acknowledging the religious emphasis of Wordsworth's 'Essay', it is nevertheless important to appreciate the different nature of this focus which illustrates the distance Wordsworth was careful to maintain from a more overtly didactic religiosity. In the Essay, while acknowledging the relationship between poetry and religion, Wordsworth distinguished the 'transcendent' and 'ethereal' in poetry's visionary inspiration from a specifically religious faith. In the deliberate choice of words, sensitive to the distorted vision and responses invited by 'religious' verse, Wordsworth avoided identifying himself with the potentially disputatious role of religious teacher. His distinction between the vision and the aims of religion and elevated poetry also implicitly located 'truth' in more immediate human experience and natural form with the infinite potential they offer for moral and spiritual enlightenment. The religion which Wordsworth identified with spiritually inspired poetry was based on a more elemental conception of religion as the spirit of good which motivated the higher aspirations of human life and influenced a harmonious relationship with the natural world.³⁹

Wordsworth's attempt to confer moral authority on his literary mission might represent an attempt to distance the visionary claims of his poetry from the evangelical associations of the 'Extraordinary Call'. However, in the 'Essay', he implicitly equated the concepts of 'enthusiastic' and 'extraordinary' when he distinguished between 'an enthusiastic, as well as ordinary sorrow' as equally demanding of the poet's sympathy and creative imagination.⁴⁰ At the same time, poet and religious evangelist equally acknowledged the

³⁹ 'Essay', p. 65.

⁴⁰ See Jon Mee, *Romanticism*, pp. 240-41, where Mee remarks on Wordsworth's concern to distance the visionary claims of his *Prelude* from the 'extraordinary calls' of popular evangelism.

representational constraints of material analogy to which the sublime abstractions of poetic or religious contemplation are inevitably subjected, and appreciated the challenge which this presents both for accuracy and dignity of expression. However, the generalised language of sensibility which Wordsworth employs is more expressive of the spiritual origins of poetry and its emotional capacity to reassure and inspire through a contemplation of the sublime and celebration of enduring truths.

Although the Wesleyan hymn obviously has an explicitly doctrinal purpose, John Wesley similarly emphasised and expressed in heightened poetic terms the need for a more personal, emotional connection with the *spirit* of faith, which transcends any mere adherence to a creed. Like Wordsworth, he is impatient of the theological pedantry which fails to connect with the essential truths of Christian revelation. Wordsworth stressed that true faith must centre in the heart, expressing his impatience with those ‘cold and formal’ ‘sects’ [such as Unitarianism] which approached religion with a ‘calculating understanding’, rather than emotional receptiveness.⁴¹ Wesley insisted on the hymns’ essential appeal to the faith of inward conviction: ‘In what other publication of the kind have you so distinct and full an account of a scriptural Christianity? Such a declaration of the heights and depths of religion?’⁴² Wesley’s reference to scriptural Christianity indirectly honours the inspirational conviction of the representatives of the early church and the profound intensity of their experience. The qualities of purity and modesty implicit in Wesley’s description of poetry as ‘the handmaid of piety’ suggest that poetry is subordinate to the theme and finer purpose which it serves, or,

⁴¹ See Ch. 3, pp. 110-12.

⁴² ‘Preface’, *Hymns, Works*, VII, 74.

more precisely, the spirit which animates poetry is more important than the lyrical conventions which define it. Clad in its virginal habit, this poetry rejects ostentation and vanity in favour of simple truth.⁴³

In his 'Preface', Wordsworth suggests that the poetry of the *Ballads* may be so much a handmaid to the moral aims of the collection as to lose its independent identity, leading readers to question whether it really could be called poetry at all: 'They will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire, by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title'.⁴⁴ In his emphasis on the emotional connection necessary for meaningful writing and reading, Wordsworth makes a distinction between the 'deep, enthusiastic joy' of a spiritually inspired response to life, 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure by which he knows and feels, and lives and moves', and the pleasure that only superficially 'delights'.⁴⁵ The former accords with John Wesley's more modestly expressed ideal of 'happiness and holiness' which denotes the contentment of a settled faith in contrast with the shallow excitement or enthusiasm that Wesley and Wordsworth were, ironically, as ready to denounce as their critics.

The moral integrity of this poetry would nevertheless ensure its enduring influence, supplying 'not a poor perishable wreath but a crown that fadeth not away', where a sense of spiritual authority is enhanced by the biblical cadences and the scriptural metaphor of the crown. In his 'Preface', Wordsworth refers to the 'divine spirit' which is the inspired 'breath' of poetry and the emotional knowledge it encapsulates.⁴⁶ For Wesley, the

⁴³ 'Essay', p. 65; 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 75.

⁴⁴ 'Advertisement', *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), p. 738.

⁴⁵ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), p. 752.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

devotional purpose of the hymns would sanctify the poetry and grant it authority and lasting influence 'as a means of raising or quickening his [the receptive reader's] spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling, or increasing his love to God and man.' The language of inspiration which Wesley applies, 'breathing', 'quickening' and 'kindling', expresses the renewing energy and illuminating power which Wordsworth also attributed to poetry, his own use of 'breath' and 'breathe', with reference to poetic inspiration similarly suggesting the movement of the spirit. He would have endorsed Wesley's faith in the capacity of such verse to deepen the reader's human sympathies and connectedness.⁴⁷

At the same time, Wordsworth warned against too narrowly doctrinal a reading of poetry from those who demanded more specific guidance from religiously inspired verse, and sought the confirmation of their own conservative assumptions, being 'beset with misconceptions and mistakes peculiar to themselves'. By acknowledging the contentious nature of poetry that is explicitly religious in character, and the misconceptions of those who approached it with rigid expectations, Wordsworth anticipated some of the later objections to what was perceived as the sermonising mysticism of poems like *The Excursion*. 'No poetry', he argues, 'has been more subject to distortion, than that species, the argument and scope of which is religious; and no lovers of the art have gone farther astray than the pious and the devout.' Wordsworth attributes the disappointment inevitably experienced by readers who attempt to impose their own expectations and construct their own meanings from a text to a lack of the humble receptiveness necessary for a

⁴⁷ 'Preface', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 75.

more enriching engagement: 'For when Christianity, the religion of humility, is founded upon the proudest faculty of our nature, what can be expected but contradiction?'⁴⁸

The visionary inspiration of Wordsworth's poetry appealed to a spiritual sensibility and willingness to acknowledge the limitations of a purely rational comprehension. This was the humble recognition that language, however inspired, can do no more than 'imperfectly shadow forth' the eternal mysteries. Wordsworth recognised that serious poetry demands an imaginative engagement with sublimities which could not be precisely articulated but only perceived by the receptive spirit and embodied metaphorically. As such, it makes an appeal to the imagination and spiritual sense which exist in the spaces and silences to which the Soul must be alert, and is dependent on the inner resources of sensibility that the mature reader should aim to cultivate. As he reasons:

In all this may be perceived the affinity between religion and poetry; between religion – making up the deficiencies of reason by faith; and poetry – passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion - whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things...and poetry - ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation.⁴⁹

In his rejection of a coldly intellectual response to his writings, Wordsworth might seem, by contrast, to favour the more emotional receptiveness that

⁴⁸ 'Essay', pp. 64-5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

characterised revivalist evangelism. Certainly he required from his ideal reader the 'animation' of emotional engagement but was wary of the zealous 'heat' of intellectual or sectarian dogmatism. While he acknowledged his aim to enlighten his readers morally and spiritually, he persistently disclaimed any formally instructive purpose. Although Charles Wesley's biblically-influenced verse explicitly reinforced the formal tenets of the faith, for him, as for Wordsworth, the verse was primarily designed to express and inspire the general spirit of moral purity and piety. The emotional inspiration and language of the hymns was presented as a further vindication of the 'heart-religion' which for the Wesley brothers, revived an older scriptural tradition, and should be adopted in favour of an empty religion of 'formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world'.⁵⁰

Wordsworth and John Wesley both cite the Hebraic rhythms of scripture as exemplar of the natural style to which they aspire. In the 'Preface', Wordsworth compares unfavourably Samuel Johnson's elegant poetical rendering of Corinthians I, Chapter xiii, 'Turn on the prudent Ant thy heedless eyes', with the unaffected force and simplicity of the Authorised scriptural original, 'Go to the Ant, thou Sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise.'⁵¹ Scriptural prose also fulfilled Wesley's stylistic ideal of an inspired, but transparently plain eloquence: 'Here are simplicity and sublimity together', he says of the style of St. John's first Epistle, 'the strongest sense and the plainest language!'⁵²

⁵⁰ Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, new edn (Leeds, 1799), p. vi.

⁵¹ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 763.

⁵² Thurs. July 18th, 1765, *Journals*, V, *Works*, XXII, 13.

Conclusion

The three preceding chapters have used biographical evidence and textual analysis to argue for an affinity in the precepts and literary practice of Wordsworth and John Wesley, demonstrating their shared commitment to the wisdom of the heart and its rational regulation. This reflects a joint endorsement of the inspirational and spiritual stimulus of genuine enthusiasm but an equivalent concern on the part of both men to distance themselves from its more extreme popular expression. In his cautious reservations and qualifications of statements of faith, Wordsworth avoided the over-emphatic assertion which might seem to identify him too closely with religious enthusiasm. It was an anxiety which Ulmer compares with John Wesley's insistence on the need to subject the emotional insights of experience to critical judgement. This concern produced, in the form of such explanatory texts as Wesley's *Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* and Wordsworth's Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*, extended defences of principle and practice which insist on the rational foundations of their literary or religious creeds, while emphasising the need for an emotional conviction of truth. For Wesley and for Wordsworth after him, truth was expressed in the moral integrity of the message and in language of equivalent transparency. This was the language of unaffected but forceful plainness, which speaks from the heart of familiar human experience.

It is nevertheless important to appreciate the different expression of the spiritual which informed the hymn lyrics of Charles Wesley edited by John,

and inspired the moral vision of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. The first was firmly grounded in an explicitly Christian faith, while Wordsworth avoided identifying with a defined creed and rejected demands for explicit religious guidance. In his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', Wordsworth judged misleading and distorting a poem which aimed for religious instruction, and was wary of those who approached his poetry with fixed assumptions and expectations. However, he emphasised the spiritual inspiration of elevated poetry that explored 'the emanations of reality and truth' in the intensities of human experience which words cannot adequately represent. Although Wordsworth had no explicit doctrinal aim, however, both he and Wesley would have considered poetry 'the handmaid of piety' insofar as it served a moral, rather than recreational, secular purpose.

Wesley and Wordsworth shared an earnest belief in the morally elevating purpose of the writings they offered to the public. Both consequently appealed to a reader of a similarly sensitive discernment. This mature appreciation was influenced by the culture of sensibility which they each, at different ends of the eighteenth century, inherited, but it was a sensibility informed by a distinctively Enlightenment respect for reason, which they felt should discipline and modify the enthusiasm associated positively with youthful passion, and negatively with its immaturity. Both Wesley and Wordsworth were equally explicit about the kind of reader and reading which they felt the serious purpose of their works demanded. Both emphatically rejected the lazy superficial reader for whom literature was no more than a recreational diversion, appealing to the shallow aesthetic precepts of conventional taste. They equally rejected a literal and disputatious response to the philosophical or

religious content of a text, demanding instead a more affective, personal connection with its spirit and sentiment. Such a response required the humility of passive receptivity in contrast with a presumptuous arrogation of the text's meaning. This positively attentive reading at the same time required the reader to actively assert all the faculties in a dynamic relationship involving the mutual investment and engagement of reader and writer. With closer reference to the poetic content of *The Lyrical Ballads*, the next chapter will consider how far Wordsworth could be felt to have satisfied his moral and communicative objective by reproducing the ordinary voice of common experience. By setting the discussion within the cultural climate of its reception, I intend to illustrate the uncertain, contradictory perceptions of the 'common' in both critic and poet, and suggest how this ambivalence was related to specific anxieties about popular enthusiasm.

Chapter 5

Literary Dissent: The ‘common voice’ in Wordsworth’s

Lyrical Ballads

This chapter will examine the concept of *commonness* as it was applied explicitly and implicitly to the popular discourse of religious evangelism and to the diction of Wordsworth’s experimental poetry in *The Lyrical Ballads*. Within a literary context, it will explore the senses of inclusiveness and accessibility embedded in the term ‘common’ and consider the contentious nature of the language adopted to achieve this communicative aim. Both Wordsworth’s new poetic and the contemporaneous Methodist mission promoted an inclusive accessibility of language and message that challenged traditional practice, established precepts of taste, and consequently invited charges of ‘dissent’. I shall consider the relationship between the common voice of this poetic and religious revivalism and consider how the connection was reflected in the critical terms applied to Wordsworth’s poetic experiment in contemporary periodicals. The voice of Francis Jeffrey’s *Edinburgh Review* has been selected for its influential cultural status, for its notoriously dominant role in the criticism of Wordsworth’s early poetry, and particularly for its religiously inflected censure of the poet’s incipient evangelism.

The chapter will also explore the tension between sympathy and embarrassment in Wordsworth’s own interpretation of the authentic voice of

ordinary experience and consider whether Wordsworth's commitment to 'real' language was compromised by a concern to distance his plain diction from the simple urgencies of the plebeian register. I suggest that this concern echoed the earlier efforts of the Methodist leadership to distinguish, with similarly variable success, between a dignified and vulgar simplicity, and dissociate itself from the coarser enthusiastic culture with which the latter was identified. The discussion is thus divided between the critical reaction to Wordsworth's experimental poetic and some illustration of the poet's own theory and practice. This structure should reveal how the critical response to the *Lyrical Ballads* is contradicted by, but also unexpectedly confirmed by, Wordsworth's own contradictory apologia for his method.

'Commonness' as an aesthetic and ethical precept

John Wesley's 'Preface' to the *Hymns* and Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Ballads* show their commitment to the 'common' in the sense of shared human values, and to the 'common' of *simplicity* against a false sophistication of sentiment and style. Through a choice of 'subjects from common life', Wordsworth intended to portray in 'simple and unelaborated' language the 'regular feelings' and 'familiar' experiences with which most readers could identify.¹ As Wordsworth intended to employ 'simple and unelaborated expressions in a selection of 'language really used by men', so, too, John Wesley, in a Christian mission to offer 'plain truth to plain people', claimed to 'write as I generally speak, *ad populum*' with 'the most obvious, easy, common

¹ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p.744.

words, wherein our meaning can be conveyed'. In this sense, *common* is the quality of 'utmost plainness' which rendered language accessible to a community. It also denotes the transparency of truth.²

Common language and sentiment can be judged both by ethical and aesthetic criteria and found wanting in each respect however. Language which is readily understood is the language of popular currency and, as such, might be felt to run the risk of debasement. The plainness designed to be accessible can abandon elegance in favour of homely simplicity, and this has the potential to degenerate into banality or coarseness. Aesthetic objections to this kind of plainness were inflected with class-based distinctions which identified inelegance and coarseness with a lack of sophistication or education.

This sense of common is implied in Methodist itinerant Francis Ashbury's introductory defence of his printed journal, published in 1792. Ashbury acknowledges that the language in which his journal is expressed may appear inelegant to the more sophisticated reader, and the content sometimes humble and repetitive. He suggests, however, that such elements are subordinated to his evangelistic aim. As he argues:

to transcribe and dress it up with greater elegance, would materially alter its original designs. Those for who it is chiefly intended, are plain and simple people, who will look for nothing elaborate or refined, but for genuine experience and naked truth'.³

² 'Preface', *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1771).

³ Francis Ashbury, *Journal*, August 1771–Dec. 1778 (Philadelphia, 1792).

This is not dissimilar from Wordsworth's preference for the simple truth of 'repeated experience' and 'plainer, more emphatic language' which represents shared, or common human experience and expression over extraordinary incident and artificial diction. While for arbiters of literary taste a stylistic simplicity was acceptable, even favoured, for its relationship to honesty, there was a clear aesthetic distinction to be drawn between dignified simplicity and inelegant plainness. These aesthetic criteria were equally applied to the language of literature and popular religious testimony.

The difficulty with the concept of 'common', as with 'enthusiasm', resides in the multiple and sometimes contradictory denotations of the word which shade from the sense of shared inheritance to inferiority of rank, from pure simplicity to banality. Like the word 'enthusiasm', the diverse and potentially contradictory senses of 'common' are illustrated in the different definitions of Samuel Johnson's dictionary. The listed denotations include the commonness of familiarity: 'frequent, usual, ordinary', and the debased commonness of 'no rank; mean; without birth or descent', 'vulgar [...] not distinguished by any excellence', a sense which gained increased currency from the early nineteenth century. This socially specific definition is in contrast with the ideal of universality and unity expressed in Johnson's additional sense of 'equally with another, indiscriminately', with the liberal political ideal of shared inheritance implied in 'To have a joint right with others in some common ground'.⁴

Methodism and Romantic poetry would thus seem to have had to negotiate another semantic and ethical boundary between the positive and negative denotations of 'common'. While challenging in itself, the embarrassment was

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary* [facsimile edn, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1990], I].

obviously heightened by the problematic association of 'common' with the vulgar style, the popular sentiment and perceived plebeian origins of religious enthusiasm. Jon Mee explicitly interprets Jeffrey's critical attacks on the products of the Lake School as part of 'a campaign against religious enthusiasm'.⁵

'Common' in the sense of 'mean' and humble is implicit in the terms applied to the enthusiastic Methodist preaching style in Graves' *The Spiritual Quixote*, published in 1779. The more cultivated sensibilities of Squire turned itinerant Methodist preacher, Geoffrey Wildgoose, 'who had had something of an academical education', are unable to digest the 'homeliness of (the) language' and 'meanness of comparisons' in the pulpit 'eloquence' of a Journeyman stay-maker and fellow itinerant.⁶ In the same period, Samuel Johnson also had to admit disappointment in the 'indeterminate notions' and 'inelegant' conversation of a Methodist enthusiast he had once, out of sympathetic curiosity, invited to his house.⁷ Applying Johnson's social definition of common, Oliver Goldsmith attributed the awkwardness of the typical Methodist to the disadvantage of being 'without birth or descent'. This, in his view, prevented their making the impression which their passionate conviction might otherwise have achieved: 'Had these been bred gentlemen, and been endued with even the meanest share of understanding, what might they not effect?'⁸ Later, poet George Crabbe similarly equates low descent with inelegance when he complained of Methodism's 'wretched jargon, composed

⁵ Jon Mee, 'Policing enthusiasm in the Romantic period: literary periodicals and the 'rational' public sphere', *Spheres of Influence, Intellectual and Cultural Publics from Shakespeare to Habermas*, ed. by Alex Benchimol and Willy Maley (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.175-95 (p. 177).

⁶ Graves, *The Spiritual Quixote*, p. 144.

⁷ Flora Macmath, *The Faith of Samuel Johnson* (London: Mowbray, 1990), p. 82

⁸ *The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. by James Prior (Philadelphia, 1875), I, 130.

of scriptural language, debased by vulgar expressions, which has a kind of mystic influence on the minds of the ignorant'.⁹ For critics of the movement, the vulgarly graphic or colloquial language of Methodist evangelism was an inevitable reflection of the common social origins of preacher and flock, itinerant evangelists being classed as 'ignorant tradesmen' whose humble breeding and simple habits enabled them to identify with their uneducated listeners.¹⁰

Wordsworth was aware of how the simple language he cultivated could be negatively interpreted as 'mean or ludicrous' by 'certain classes of person', although he defended his art against the charge by implying that such a response indicated a reader's lack of sympathetic discernment.¹¹ But, as acknowledged by recent Wesley editor, James Dale, who makes an explicit comparison between John Wesley and Wordsworth's literary method and style, the simplicity cultivated by both Methodist leader and Romantic poet hovered precariously on the borders of pathos and bathos, continually challenging the precepts of polite taste and inviting the contrasting responses of admiration or ridicule.¹² In the early opinion of Leigh Hunt, for example, Wordsworth's plain style more often exhibited 'puerility rather than simplicity'.¹³ Dale asserts, however, that both writers' 'unaffected simplicity in general made an influential impact on those left cold by artificial elaborations'.¹⁴ The modifier 'unaffected' was nevertheless challenged by those in Wordsworth's time and

⁹ George Crabbe, *Poems*, ed. by A.W. Ward (Cambridge, 1905), p. 271.

¹⁰ Lyles, *Methodism Mocked*, p. 72.

¹¹ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 759.

¹² James Dale, 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 48.

¹³ *Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism*, ed. by Lawrence Husten Houtchens (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1956); 'Preface', p. 35, quotation from Hunt's Notes to *The Feast of the Poets*, printed in *The Reflector* in 1811, rev. 1814 and 1815.

¹⁴ Dale, 'Introduction', *Hymns, Works*, VII, 48.

later who have questioned the persuasiveness of his common voice. Chief amongst such critics was that guardian of literary taste, Francis Jeffrey.

The regulatory role of The Edinburgh Review

In his study of Romantic authority, David Riede emphasises the culturally regulatory authority assumed by such conservative periodicals as *The Quarterly Review* founded in 1810, and the reactionary *Blackwood's Magazine* of 1817.¹⁵ Sharing the general critical criteria, the more liberal *Edinburgh* crucially contributed to this process but under Jeffrey's editorship, applied stringent standards of honesty and clarity, as well as aesthetic propriety, to contemporary literature. Despite the liberal credentials of *The Edinburgh* with its respect for the political ideals of 'common rights' and 'common interest', there was an anti-democratizing agenda in the editor's concern to defend enlightened principles of taste from a debasing populism. Jeffrey's editorial voice reflected a climate of cultural reaction against the more democratic stance of Dissenting journals like *The Monthly Review* and *The Analytical Review* that had preceded them in the 1780s and 90s.

Jeffrey's aesthetic and ethical criteria were shaped by a Scottish Enlightenment culture of rational sensibility which influenced precise literary criteria based on principles of moderation and restraint.¹⁶ Such fastidious standards were invariably opposed to any of the exaggerated or coarse stylistic tendencies associated with popular culture and identified with religious

¹⁵ David Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 266-7.

¹⁶ See Philip Flynn, 'Francis Jeffrey and the Scottish Critical Tradition', *British Romanticism and the Edinburgh Review*, ed. by Massimiliano Demata and Duncan Wu (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

enthusiasm. In the view of Marilyn Butler, *The Edinburgh* aimed 'to influence a more elite stratum of opinion', favouring a 'slashing' satirical mode which defended the rational principles of educated taste with its values of civility and propriety from a more eccentric archaism, simplicity or exoticism'.¹⁷ Where taste is identified with the precepts of established hierarchies, cultural and religious Dissent can thus be viewed as a breach of this faculty. *The Edinburgh* assumed the authority to 'exalt critical judgement as the faculty that restored intellectual agency and distinction in a leveling age'.¹⁸

Jeffrey was critical of the falsity inherent in the classically-educated Wordsworth's adoption of the voice of humble experience:

we may excuse a certain homeliness of language in the productions of a ploughman or a milkwoman,; but we cannot bring ourselves to admire it in an author who has had occasion to indite odes to his college bell and inscribe hymns to the Penates.¹⁹

Jeffrey considered it a fallacy to suppose that someone of Wordsworth's class and background could either identify with or convincingly communicate the emotions of those so remote from his own experience:

¹⁷ Marilyn Butler, 'Culture's medium: the role of the review', *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 121-47 (p. 131).

¹⁸ See Ian Duncan, 'Edinburgh, capital of the nineteenth century', in *Romantic Metropolis, The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780- 1840*, ed. by James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 45-64 (p. 57).

¹⁹ Jeffrey, [Review] *Thalaba, Edinburgh*, p. 66.

the different classes of society have each of them a distinct character, as well as a separate idiom.[...]The love, or grief, or indignation of an enlightened and refined character, is not only expressed in a different language, but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger, of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench.²⁰

Jeffrey was therefore critical of the way in which Wordsworth's humble ballad subjects were assigned an unconvincing sophistication of language and sentiment. He also objected to the use of a banal domestic context, with all the distraction of trivial detail, for the expression of a refined moral philosophy. Jeffrey's contrastingly positive 1810 review of George Crabbe's *Borough* praises the way in which this poem's humble subjects were not accorded an authority that falsified social reality or challenged its hierarchy. Crabbe's poetry lacked 'moralising swains or sentimental tradesmen; and scarcely ever seeks to charm us by the artless manner or lowly virtues of his personages'.²¹ The raised voice of the common philosopher was a worrying symptom of social emancipation. It showed the independent assertiveness also seen by such as Jeffrey in the mobilising force of popular evangelism.

The popular energies regarded so suspiciously by post-Dissenting periodicals were manifested in a mass movement like Methodism which exploited the opportunities of expanding print culture for disseminating its enthusiastic creed and the voice of popular experience. In 1802, *The Edinburgh* lamented 'the swarm of ephemeral sermons which issue from the press,' to which it claimed:

²⁰ Jeffrey, [Review] *Thalaba*, *Edinburgh*, p. 66.

²¹ *Ibid.*, *The Borough; a Poem*, in *Twenty-Four Letters*, by the Rev. George Crabbe, *The Edinburgh Review* (April 1810).

we are principally indebted to the vanity of popular preachers who are puffed up, by female praises into a belief that what may be delivered, with great propriety, in a chapel full of visitors and friends, is fit for the deliberate attention of the public.²²

The terms in which the periodical denigrated the communicative mode of religious revivalism reflected specific anxieties about its nature and potential. 'Swarm' evokes the dangerous enthusiasm of uncontrolled excess associated with the crowd that threatened to swamp the stable order and obliterate cultural distinctions. This view illustrated Christian Garve's differentiation between the 'Enthusiasmus' and the 'Schärmerei' which originated in Lutheran discourse.²³ It was a distinction which was also emphasised by Coleridge. The statement in the *Edinburgh* expresses the 'common' of vulgar populism, rather than universality. The reference to mass-produced sermons as 'ephemeral' suggests a lack of cultural stability, while disparaging references to the popularity of enthusiastic style and sentiments with the female public also reveal that the mode of expression was felt to display the feminine emotionalism that degraded a male cultural authority.

The general dissemination of evangelistic style and sentiment and *The Edinburgh*'s related concern was acknowledged by revivalist sympathisers like John Styles who objected to the way that in the *Review* 'the Evangelical and Methodist Magazines were chosen as objects of sarcastic ridicule, on account

²² *Edinburgh Review*, I (1802), p. 128.

²³ Christian Garve, "Ueber die Schwärmerei", in *Gaemmelte Werke, I abteilung: Die Aufsatzsammlungen*, III (Hildesheim, 1985), quoted in Anthony J. La Vopa, 'The Philosopher and the Swarmer', *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe*, pp. 85-115 (p. 85).

of their wide and increasing circulation among the populace.²⁴ This increasing circulation was felt by its critics to have debased the currency of language and emotion. Evangelistic discourse was viewed in terms of a style, which, in its undisciplined diffuseness, seemed to threaten clear thinking and expression. The exaggerated 'plainness' of Wordsworth's ballad style was an attribute cultivated by the religious evangelist while the 'verbosity' to which Francis Jeffrey equally objected was also a term that was applied to the inflated rhetoric of the popular pulpit.

A dangerous conflation of religion and poetry

This connection between the radical energies of innovative literature and popular sects like Methodism is explicitly made by Francis Jeffrey in his reviews of writings by members of the Lake School in the early 1800s. Here, a language which has been more satirically directed against a general culture of religious enthusiasm is specifically applied to a challenging new kind of poetry. Alluding to Robert Southey's *Thalaba*, published in 1802, Jeffrey remarked:

The author who is now before us belongs to a sect of poets, that has established itself in this country within these ten or twelve years, and is looked upon, we believe, as one of its chief champions and apostles. The peculiar doctrines of this sect, it would not, perhaps, be very easy to explain, but, that they are dissenters from the established systems in poetry

²⁴ John Styles, *Strictures on Two Critiques in the Edinburgh Review on the Subject of Methodism and Missions* (1808), p.28, quoted in Mee, *Romanticism*, p. 64, fn. 133.

and criticism is admitted and proved, indeed, by the whole tenor of their compositions [...]. The disciples of this school boast much of its originality, and seem to value themselves very highly, for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority, and re-asserted the independence of genius.²⁵

The religious terms which Jeffrey critically applies to the productions of the 'Lake School' interpret its experimental simplicity or exoticism as a form of literary heresy. His representation of the Lake poets as a 'sect' with 'a creed and revelation of their own' explicitly identifies literary independence with subversive religious challenge. Although satirically exaggerated, Jeffrey's comparison reflects a serious concern at the way in which poetry was increasingly appropriating religious aspiration, and a heretical 'disciple' like Wordsworth 'only repeating and virtually encouraging the enthusiasm of the Methodists in his desire for a poetry and religion of affect'.²⁶ Words like 'sect', 'disciple' and 'apostles' are also more applicable to revivalist sectaries and apostolic evangelism than formally established Dissenting creeds like Presbyterianism, Unitarianism and Quakerism, which had attracted prominent industrialists and scientists like the Wedgwoods and Joseph Priestley. The kind of heresy which the language conjures is the primitive revivalism of movements like Methodism.

While Jeffrey acknowledges the similar cultural authority of poetry and religion, their relationship, in his view, was problematic. In the *Thalaba* review he remarks: 'Poetry has this much in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer

²⁵ Jeffrey, [Review] *Thalaba*, *Edinburgh*, p. 63.

²⁶ Mee, *Romanticism*, p. 77.

lawful to call in question'.²⁷ The statement acknowledges the popular association of religion and poetry, and their common origin in the enthusiasm of visionary insight. However it is prescriptive in its insistence on deference to traditional law that indirectly rejects popular trends in both religion and poetry, especially where it seems to be predicated on the emotional response of the uneducated. There is a sense that poetry and religion can guide and inspire only where recognised distinctions are observed. This guarantees a reliable authority that can command respect, and in turn, confer stability. The qualifying phrase, 'this much', in Jeffrey's assertion that 'religion and poetry have this much in common', also hints at the danger in too close an identification; proper boundaries will be blurred if the roles and expressive modes of religion and poetry are confounded. Despite their claim to an independent 'doctrine', Jeffrey locates the inspiration of these literary *dissenters* (his own italics) both in the subversive influence of German Romanticism and the libertarian philosophies of 'the great apostle of Geneva', Jean Jacques Rousseau.

In the view of Robert Ryan, Jeffrey was concerned at the way in which these liberating tendencies were manifested in a popularizing discourse whereby 'lofty concepts were translated into vulgar diction', and, with particular reference to Wordsworth, in an affectation of 'simplicity and familiarity of language' which could degenerate into a common banality and verbosity that degraded the dignity of the poetic genre.²⁸ These tendencies were evident also in the way the Lake Poets elevated the personal revelation of emotional conviction over cultural tradition, asserting 'the old Protestant insistence that, in the most important aspects of life, individual intuition, or

²⁷ Jeffrey, [Review] *Thalaba*, Edinburgh, p. 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

private inspiration was of more importance than doctrines defined by authority and sanctified by custom'.²⁹ Although Ryan presents these as the characteristics of Protestant Dissent, they were increasingly identified less with its rational expression than with the more popular enthusiastic culture from which Jeffrey was anxious to distance educated discourse and which he felt *The Edinburgh* had a responsibility to correct.

The veiled sarcasm of Jeffrey's references to religious and poetic inspiration: 'the independence of genius', suggests a mistrust of the emotionally intuitive spontaneity which seemed to challenge rational authority in its apparent independence of the usual constraints of order and method. As a mysterious, visionary faculty unpredictable in its operations, the concept of 'genius' inspired both awe and unease, associated as it was with the enthusiasm of creative and religious imagination and the dangerous self-delusion and self-importance which that denoted. Jeffrey was sharp and discerning enough to recognise Wordsworth's gifts but in the culturally regulatory role perhaps natural to a trained lawyer, considered it his duty, as *The Monthly Review* expressed it, to correct 'The Extravagant Mistakes of Genius'.³⁰ Despite other differences, he shared this critical perspective with Coleridge who similarly invoked literary tradition in the *Biographia* when he suggested the need for Wordsworth to curb the eccentric tendencies of his experimental style.³¹

Implicit in the concept of religious evangelism is the liberation of the popular voice and the emotional convictions which threatened stable, received

²⁹ Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, p. 32.

³⁰ Review of *The River Duddon* and other poems (Oct. 1820), p. 132.

³¹ See Coleridge's analysis of Wordsworth's experimental poetic in the *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Bollingen Series, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Chs. 17-22.

wisdom. Literary periodicals promoted instead the 'vested interests of institutions and the ruling classes', and the cultural consensus 'of gentlemen speaking to gentlemen', a community designed to protect ethical and aesthetic standards.³² This educated exchange, as Jurgen Habermas represents it, was the bourgeois public sphere which had a dominant role in the shaping and defending of the tenets of polite taste but was increasingly unsettled by the assertive voice of plebeian discourse.³³ This discourse included the sometimes strident and compelling voice of religious enthusiasm.

The communicative aims of literary and religious evangelists inevitably incorporated a keen awareness of audience. *The Edinburgh's* perceptions of audience were rooted in clear social and gender distinctions which crossed political boundaries. Philosopher David Hume, a major influence on Jeffrey's thought, asserted, 'Our connection with each other as men of letters is greater than our difference as adhering to different sects and systems'.³⁴ Ian Duncan considers the *Edinburgh* representative of this attitude in the 'sociological claim' it made 'on a class position' from 'an institutional base independent from the levelling flux of the market', and 'encoded in its promotion of the faculty of judgement'.³⁵ As a 'crucible of such major public formulations' as 'professional-class male public intellectuals, the entrepreneurial publisher, the critical quarterly and monthly magazine and the national historical novel', he sees it as having moulded both public opinion and literary practice.³⁶ This collective desire to preserve institutional stability promoted and advanced the opinions and interests of a masculine cultural authority implicitly opposed to

³² Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, p. 267.

³³ Mee, 'Policing enthusiasm', *Spheres of Influence from Shakespeare to Habermas*.

³⁴ *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. by J.Y.T. Greig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), I. 172-73.

³⁵ Duncan, 'Edinburgh', p. 57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

the independent, the feminine, the populist. The shared precepts of educated taste would inevitably influence the judgement of literature which aimed to reproduce the common voice of ordinary experience or a less regulated emotional discourse.

Banal simplicity in 'The Lyrical Ballads'

Francis Jeffrey was not opposed to a dignified simplicity of language; indeed, as noted earlier, he admired this quality in Wordsworth's poetic contemporaries George Crabbe and Thomas Campbell whom he favourably reviewed for their honest and truthful depiction of simple characters.³⁷ He was critical of a linguistic simplicity which lacked proper restraint and instead exhibited what he judged an exaggerated homeliness that was both vulgar and inauthentic. Jeffrey's evaluation of stylistic simplicity was rooted in an important distinction between the common of honest plainness and an affected simplicity. Despite his aversion to the exotic extravagancies and improbabilities of Southey's *Thalaba*, Jeffrey favourably compared the style of the poem with 'the effusions' of the author of *The Lyrical Ballads*, 'who commemorates with so much in effect the chattering of Harry Gill's teeth, and tells the tale of the one-eyed huntsman "who had a cheek like a cherry"', and beautifully warns his studious friend of the risk he ran of "growing double". The term 'effusions', linked, perhaps paradoxically, with 'plainness', is typical of the discourse on enthusiasm. Jeffrey condemns the use of colloquial clichés

³⁷ Jeffrey, [Review] *Gertrude of Wyoming, a Pennsylvanian Tale; and other Poems*, by Thomas Campbell, *Edinburgh Review* (1809).

which in their banality and indignity fail to provoke a serious emotional response in the reader or to communicate a convincing depth of emotion. This may be an inappropriate objection to the playful folk ballad to which Jeffrey refers, but suggests that Jeffrey was unreceptive to Wordsworth's attempt to revive the common folk inheritance of ballad narrative.

Jeffrey was apparently unimpressed by the aural elements of a poem designed, in the tradition of the regional ballad, to be read out loud and appreciated, in this case, for its vivid onomatopoeic replication of Harry Gill's stuttering speech:

No word to any man he utters,
Abed or up, to young or old;
But ever to himself he utters
Poor Harry Gill is very cold.'
Abed or up, by night or day;
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.

(p. 62, l. 121-126)

For Jeffrey, this exaggerated simplicity created an absurd impression which degraded the dignity of poetry. A rhythmically repetitive onomatopoeia, with the expressive domestic analogy of the mill, also distinguishes 'The Idiot Boy':

Burr, burr – now Johnny's lips they burr,

As loud as any mill, or near it;
Meek as a lamb the pony moves,
And Johnny makes the noise he loves,
And Betty listens, glad to hear it

(p. 91, l.107-111).

The repetition of the impersonal pronoun and general pedestrian simplicity of the rhythm and syntax effectively heightens the quality of innocent homeliness. Elsewhere the same simple vitality is achieved through a nursery metre. This prompted accusations of 'puerility' from critics unimpressed by such crude poetic experiments:³⁸

The owlets hoot, the owlets curr,
And Johnny's lips they burr, burr, burr
And on he goes beneath the moon

(p. 94, l.114-116)

Jeffrey was inclined to disparage the jaunty metre which Wordsworth employed in the narrative ballads and to deride as an undignified affectation what was designed to connect the reader with the inherited rhythms of folk narrative. The consonantal density or sparseness of the lexis, and the staccato, uneven rhythms lack the elegance and harmony traditionally considered a

³⁸ See, for example, the review in *The Beau Monde*, 'Poems in Two Volumes' (Oct. 1807).

requisite of beauty. Similarly, the suggestion of Northern syntax which Danby identifies in such poems as 'The Waggoner' might disconcert with a rugged homeliness remote from formal eloquence.³⁹ As with the discourse of Methodist itinerancy, traditional stylistic elegance was inevitably sacrificed to the shared goal of common communicability, as Wordsworth perceived it. Critics questioned whether this goal was actually realised by an undignified choice of language and subject. For Jeffrey, the objective was subverted by the material being expressed in a regional, rather than universal idiom.

In his critical appraisal of Wordsworth's experimental 'common' poetic in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge questions the appropriateness or authenticity of Wordsworth's imitation of the real language of men. He quotes from the rhetorically stylised language in the seventh stanza of Wordsworth's 'The Thorn':

That I have heard her cry,
 'Oh misery! Oh misery!
 Oh woe is me! Oh misery!'

(p. 85, l. 251-253)

He then observes:

When I [...] compare this with the language of ordinary men, or with that which I can conceive of as at all likely to proceed in real life from such a

³⁹ J. F. Danby, 'Simon Lee and The Idiot Boy', *The Lyrical Ballads Casebook, Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by A. E. Dyson and others (Oxford: Macmillan Education, 1972), pp. 194-214 (pp. 195-96).

narrator, as is supposed in the note to the poem; compare it either in the succession of the images or of the sentences [...] I reflect with delight how little a mere theory, though of his own workmanship, interferes with the processes of genuine imagination in a man of true poetic genius.⁴⁰

The comment suggests that the poem works despite Wordsworth's sometimes inappropriate commitment to the ideal of plainness.

In view of the emphasis of this study, it seems significant that Coleridge considered the exclamatory rhetoric of this extract from 'The Thorn' to raise it above the banality of everyday speech to a mode more reminiscent of the enthusiastic style of the 'self-inspired minister of the conventicle!' as 'a fair specimen of common extemporary devotion'. By comparing its eloquent resonance with Adam and Eve's 'sublime' hymn of praise in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with the self-conscious lightness of the exclamatory, Coleridge exalts both the emotionally spontaneous expression 'in opposition to an established liturgy' and indirectly, the natural informality of the context.⁴¹ It seems that, for Coleridge, in this instance, the ordinary voice is not debased by its implied association with religious enthusiasm; instead, the emotional intensity of the woman's lament is felt to dignify and exalt the language as well as elevate the status of the 'common' narrator.

For Coleridge, the common voice is identified with popular enthusiasm; at the same time, the implication is that it can be redeemed artistically when it assumes a more elegiac eloquence. This serves to dignify the expression of powerful feeling and, with the infectious stimulus of enthusiasm, inspires a

⁴⁰ Coleridge, *Biographia* II, 59-60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

reciprocal sympathy in the reader. The assumptions of Coleridge's statement echo Jeffrey's assertion that, to move the reader, passion must be expressed in elevated terms. Coleridge thankfully admits that the lament is not a convincing expression of common in the sense of 'commonplace' speech; the latter, he believed, debased the emotions expressed and disengaged the reader.

Illustrating a typically contradictory response to the common voice and the culture with which it was identified, Coleridge and Jeffrey each criticised the inauthenticity of Wordsworth's 'real language of men' while considering the prosaisms of reality inappropriate for his higher literary and moral purpose.

Wordsworth nevertheless made strong claims to authenticity in the subject and even the language of some of his other poems. The character of Simon Lee, the huntsman, for example, was apparently drawn from life, and he later relates, in his notes to Isabella Fenwick, how Simon's expression of pleasure in the baying hounds, 'I love to hear their voice' was taken 'word for word from the lips' of the original.⁴² This poem supplies an interesting example of Wordsworth's method and his complicated relationship with his 'common' subjects. As with other of his subjects he avoids patronising the figures in his poems, adopting the simple language which best accords with their own unaffected simplicity:

And he is lean and he is sick,
His dwindled body's half awry;
His ankles they are swollen and thick,
His legs are thin and dry

⁴² *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Curtis, p. 112.

(p. 66, l. 33-36)

The narrator appears to respect Simon's unpitying self-reliance, and so does not pity him in his turn. Yet he does not attempt an intimate identification, his reflective commentary preserving a distance from his subject.

Oh reader! Had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thoughts can bring,
O gentle reader! You would find
A tale in everything

(p. 67, l.73-76)

This is a distance which may be creative, philosophical and cultural.

Wordsworth did reveal his own sense of the possibility of becoming consumed by these passions in his expression of the danger inherent in the way a writer can 'confound and identify his own feelings with theirs'. This is a fallacious belief he dismisses as 'entire delusion', despite it being to an extent unavoidable in poetic dramatisation.⁴³ Wordsworth's statement seems to endorse his sense of the educated writer's need to retain an imaginative and critical detachment from the cruder, though honest emotional response of the uneducated. It also preserves Simon as a humble object of compassion and maintains the writer's own controlling, authoritative role. At the same time, Simon is presented as a morally educative example to the observer.

⁴³ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 751. These remarks, added to the 1802 edition of the *Ballads*, suggest a more pronounced concern on Wordsworth's part to maintain a social and cultural distance from his subjects.

Although orthodox criticism considered Wordsworth's simple ballad diction to lack musical accessibility and grace, Wordsworth, like John Wesley, denounces a superficial engagement with the seductive stylistic attributes of verse. He would claim the music of the common voice to lie in the resonance of powerful feeling which challenged conventional harmonies. These irregularities could be felt to engage thought by surprising expectation in contrast with the way that conventional fluency invites a more complacent detachment. In his review of *The Borough*, Jeffrey negatively contrasts the controlled elegance of lines influenced by Pope with the 'unsteadiness and inconsistency in the tone' of 'expression and versification' sometimes evident elsewhere. As in his criticism of Wordsworth, he takes exception to 'a certain quaint, broken, and harsh manner of his (Crabbe's) own [...], and the sudden harsh turns and broken conciseness' which he sometimes cultivates.⁴⁴ The harsh and broken lines which Jeffrey quotes from *The Borough* are often in a conversational idiom resembling the everyday vernacular of Wordsworth's dramatic ballad monologues. Such departures from formal literary convention challenge, rather than confirm the reader's preconceptions and by someone of Jeffrey's tastes, are thus likely to be regarded as both uncommunicative and subversive.

A common speech 'purified from its defects'

Although Jeffrey believed that Wordsworth threatened the eminence of poetry by his 'mean' conversational diction and attempt to identify with simple

⁴⁴ Jeffrey, [Review] *The Borough*, *Edinburgh*, p. 54.

sentiment, the poet betrayed the same anxiety and ambivalence. In his original 1798 advertisement to the *Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote:

It will perhaps appear to them [ie. 'readers of superior judgment'], that wishing to avoid the prevalent faults of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity.⁴⁵

Despite the poet's apparent commitment to linguistic simplicity and human truth, such remarks reveal his sense of the need to improve on nature by refining language that was too ordinary. In his fuller 'Preface' to the 1802 edition of the poems, the poet of ordinary speech admits to feeling it necessary to refine and purify the coarsenesses of common rustic speech, eliminating 'all rational causes of dislike and disgust' which might offend the reader and undermine the moral purpose of the poems. The parenthetical intensifier, 'purified indeed, from all rational causes', seems to underline the poet's fastidious detachment from an authentically coarse vernacular. Wordsworth stresses that his choice of language will be governed by 'taste and feeling' which 'will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life'. He argues that:

If the Poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally [...] lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must

⁴⁵ 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), p. 738.

necessarily be dignified and variegated. [...] He will remove what will otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion.⁴⁶

On the one hand, Wordsworth declares his intention to reproduce the 'language really used by men', but admits to the need to enhance or censor it to better fulfil his didactic purpose. Wordsworth's aim to relate incidents from common life in the real language of men is fraught with the danger that the banality of ordinary speech will undermine the authority of its universal significance.

Wordsworth's theoretical defence of his method expresses an uncertain interpretation of the relationship between commonness and artistic truth, his reconstruction of ordinary conversation suggesting a need for the rational regulation of spontaneous impulses. Coleridge challenges the logic of Wordsworth's declared intention to purify 'common' speech with the argument that 'a rustic's language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar [...] will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense, however learned or refined he may be'.⁴⁷

Concerned to defend the elite designation of serious literature and to avoid the corrupting influence of plebeian taste, Francis Jeffrey was quick to identify undignified banalities, but also the internal contradictions of aim and practice which indicated a self-deceptive ambivalence on the author's part. William Hazlitt also believed that Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* failed to reach a defined audience: 'The vulgar do not read them, the learned, who see all things

⁴⁶ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), pp. 744, 750, 751.

⁴⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia*, II, 52.

through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them'.⁴⁸ The statement encapsulates the problematic contradictions in some of the ballads, the levity and seriousness, the sophistication and simplicity which could bore, irritate or bewilder. It again expresses the incongruity Jeffrey considered a weakness of primitive art and which characterised the common enthusiastic style.

Wordsworth's uncertain relationship with 'common' is demonstrated in his own critical reaction against his ballad 'The Female Vagrant', which he had originally defended. 'The diction of that poem is often vicious', he wrote to Anne Taylor in 1801, 'and the descriptions are often false, giving proofs of a mind inattentive to the true nature of the subject on which it was employed'.⁴⁹ Wordsworth's increasingly assertive self-justification, with the insecurity it disguised, suggests a sensitivity to criticism that exposes his own ambivalence about his 'common' poetic. He further distanced himself from 'The Female Vagrant' after 1814 when he responded to John Payne Collier's praise for the poem by dismissing it as having been 'addressed to coarse sympathies, and had little or no imagination about it, nor invention as to story'.⁵⁰ Wordsworth's judgement echoes Jeffrey's objections to his lapses in taste and judgement, and to a failure of imagination. He appears to have assimilated the discriminatory principles of *The Edinburgh* in a revisionist deference to its enlightenment aesthetics.

Wordsworth elsewhere showed his sense of the need for an extended justification of his method and purpose as in his explanatory notes on 'The

⁴⁸ Hazlitt, 'Mr. Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 89.

⁴⁹ Wordsworth to Anne Taylor, April 9th, 1801, *Letters, Early Years*, p. 328.

⁵⁰ Wordsworth to John Payne Collier, 1814, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), I, 334.

Thorn' of 1800-5. He here asserted his poetic aim by defending the poem's chief character as 'sufficiently common' for his poetic and philosophical purpose. At the same time, Wordsworth attempted to elevate language and theme in the ballad's bleak folk narrative of infanticide by comparing its sometimes repetitive lexis and rhythms to the simple force of scriptural discourse. This analogy serves both to dignify the poem while confirming the critical perception of the ballads' religiosity. There is nevertheless a contradiction in the way that Wordsworth at the same time acknowledged the 'deficiencies of language' for convincingly communicating the most powerful human feeling, a deficiency for which an apparently uninventive repetition of resonant words seeks to compensate.

The shadow of a babe you trace,
A baby and a baby's face,
And that it looks at you;
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain
The baby looks at you again

(p. 84, l. 227-231)

By indirectly admitting that 'men of slow faculties and deep feelings' may be unable to articulate their most intense experiences in elevated or elegant terms, Wordsworth indicates an awareness of the problematic nature of his choice of common diction for 'readers who are not accustomed to sympathize with men feeling in that manner or using such language'.⁵¹ Wordsworth's elaborate apologia for the poem's nature and purpose attempts to flatter the

⁵¹ Note appended to 'The Thorn', vol 1 of 1800 edn of *The Lyrical Ballads*, p. 351.

superior discernment of the receptive reader and denigrate the philistinism, or 'stupid nonsense,' of such as Jeffrey.⁵²

The unnatural 'commonness' of Wordsworth's ballad themes and language

Jeffrey's belief in the superior aesthetic appeal of the *exceptional* in nature and art might seem to contradict his criticism of the strangeness of Wordsworth's choice of human subjects and diction in some of his more extreme or eccentric ballad themes.⁵³ It could nevertheless be inversely applied to his criticism of Wordsworth's method; in proportion to the degree to which *positively* exceptional qualities move or inspire, so do negatively exceptional examples provoke embarrassment or disgust. This was the feeling which the most sensitive of Wordsworth's critics claimed was aroused by portraits of imbecility or simple fondness expressed in similarly naïve or puerile language. They suggested a failure on the part of the writer to observe the distinction which Coleridge made between 'simplicity and simpleness'.

There were subjects and domestic affections which Jeffrey and other literary commentators felt to be too far removed from what they considered familiar human experience to be appropriate material for serious poetry. Coleridge suggests that such material was far from common in making 'wilful selections from human nature of its meanest forms and under the least attractive associations', rather than showing 'a faithful adherence to essential nature'.⁵⁴ Jeffrey, however, distinguishes between the commonplace and the dignified commonality of a shared emotional inheritance in his assertion that

⁵² Wordsworth to Walter Scott, August 4th, 1808, *Middle Years*, pp. 263-65 (p. 264).

⁵³ See Jeffrey's *Essay on Beauty*, 1st edn, 1790, repr. of 5th edn (London: Alexander Murray, 1871).

⁵⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, II, 119.

‘the poor and vulgar may interest us in poetry by their situation, but never, we apprehend, by any sentiments that are peculiar to their condition, and still less by any language that is characteristic of it’.⁵⁵ In its stylistic emphasis, Jeffrey’s remark proposes that poetic communicability requires a superior dignity and elegance of language lacking in the idiom of humble diction through which Wordsworth believed he could make everyday suffering accessible.

The polite reading public was probably more receptive to conventionally picturesque depictions of rural poverty, and some openly objected to the disturbing oddity of subjects like ‘The Idiot Boy’. The otherwise appreciative John Wilson found Wordsworth’s expression of the mother’s fondness for her idiot son offensive. He evidently felt that there were areas of human experience which through their extreme, unnatural character, alienated rather than engaged the common sympathies and were thus unfit subjects for poetry. Paying tribute to Wordsworth’s general capacity to move the reader, he argued that, in this instance:

The affection of Betty Foy had nothing in it to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the constitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us, and prevents us from sympathising with her. We are unable to enter into her feelings, and consequently take little or no interest in her situation.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jeffrey, [Review] *Thalaba*, *Edinburgh*, p.66.

⁵⁶ ‘Letter to Wordsworth from John Wilson’, 1802, *Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads: A Casebook*, 2nd edn, p.62.

Wilson echoes Jeffrey's objection to the way in which Wordsworth attempts to appeal to the reader's natural, shared sympathies with an unnatural and extreme example of simple, inarticulate devotion. Wilson's choice of such emotive language as 'disgusts us', 'exhibits the [...] instinctive feeling inherent in [...] every animal', is in itself prejudiced, suggesting the selective social sympathy which is unwilling to identify with less picturesque or pathetic examples of privation. Such sentiments are expressed in his remark:

I have often applied to idiots, in my own mind, that sublime expression of scripture, that their life is hidden with God.... I have, indeed, often looked upon the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society towards idiots as the great triumph of the human heart. It is there that I see the strength, disinterestedness, and grandeur of love.

Criticising the false delicacy which rejected such subjects as the idiot boy and his mother as offensive or degrading, Wordsworth inverted his critics' socially selective judgement by according them a superior spiritual distinction and mystery while claiming such uncommon examples to be representative of elemental human nature and emotion. In accordance with his aim to express the universal passions of men he affirmed our common humanity in emphatic rejection of Jeffrey's distinction between the passions of the humble and educated, and his claim that poverty made men ridiculous. Wordsworth, however, would maintain that an appropriately sympathetic response to such subject matter involved a redefinition of aesthetic and moral 'taste', or more accurately, a *sensibility* which substituted emotional engagement for critical detachment. This involved a reciprocal emotional response to the language of

the heart which represented the 'real' speech he was attempting to reproduce. Jeffrey, of course challenged the sincerity and authenticity of this deliberate simplicity.

Although this investigation is focused on the transitional cultural tensions of the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, to support the general premise of this chapter, it is worth noting the embarrassment which influenced Wordsworth's revision of the poem 'Beggars' over successive decades.⁵⁷ John Alexander convincingly argues that Wordsworth's amendments to the poem in accordance with conventional stylistic criteria progressively undermined the emotive impact that had relied on lexical and metrical simplicity.⁵⁸ The initial version employed plain monosyllabic lexis:

Before me begging she did stand,
Pouring out sorrows like a sea;
Grief after grief; - on English land
Such woes I knew could never be.

Here the uneven, almost stumbling pace also has a poignant sparseness which conveys the woman's desolation.

In his 1827 revision, Wordsworth introduced formal inversions and Latinate lexis:

Her suit no faltering scruples checked;
Forth did she pour, in current free

⁵⁷ 'Beggars', *Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1983).

⁵⁸ John H. Alexander, *Reading Wordsworth* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 5-6.

Tales that could challenge no respect
But from a blind credulity

These stylistic refinements serve to obliterate the pain which Wordsworth had claimed a strong and simple metre made more accessible.

This increasingly conformist style provoked criticism from Barron Field who, in 1828, quoting some of the poet's early claims, accused Wordsworth of betraying the cause by abandoning:

that simplicity of speech, which you taught us was the true language of the heart, and to make some tardy sacrifice at the shrine of poetic diction; and thus, after having 'created the taste by which you have been enjoyed', in a small degree deserting your disciples.⁵⁹

In the context of this discussion, the religious connotations of the last word are significant.

For his final version of 1845, Wordsworth further revised the syntax of the verse in accordance with traditional criteria of 'elegance and dignity':

Advancing, forth she stretched her hand
And begged an alms with doleful plea
That ceased not.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Barron Field, Letter to Wordsworth, 1828, quoted in Alexander, *Reading Wordsworth*, p. 6, fn. 13.

⁶⁰ Revisions to l. 13-16 of 'Beggars', *Peter Bell*, ed. by Jordan, p. 114.

The 'improved' lines have entirely lost the power of simplicity and the freshness of genuine inspiration.

Wordsworth's successive revisions of the *Lyrical Ballads* have been viewed by critics like Alexander as a sad capitulation to cultural convention and an expression of the poet's increasingly conservative desire to distance himself from vulgar non-conformity. His formal refinement of almost all the lines singled out for criticism by Jeffrey perhaps reflect a deepening embarrassment with the independent innovations of his dissenting youth. The examples of the original and revised versions of 'Beggars' may be felt to demonstrate the 'distressing' contrast between cautious maturity and the creative originality of youth. Again, it could suggest an unconscious identification of emotional directness and plainness with the youthful improprieties from which age progressively distances itself. Despite the implications of self-betrayal, Alexander is describing the almost inevitable process of Wordsworth's gradual submission to the external cultural pressures and internal inhibitions which he had never successfully resolved in his relationship with the common voice.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered how an ambivalent relationship with the 'common' and embarrassment with its vulgar expression was related to an anxiety about popular enthusiasm. It has suggested that the religiously inflected criticism of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* identified its emphasis on ordinary experience and familiar language with the aims and style of religious evangelism, and drew its critical idiom from the discourse of enthusiasm. Jeffrey's

representation of Wordsworth's literary experiment as a form of 'dissent' showed how he considered the poet to have departed from the polite tenets of literary taste, which constituted, for him, a betrayal of class and vocation. Although he subscribed to the moral sensibility of enlightenment theory, Jeffrey's judgement was rooted in a class-based cultural prejudice which identified Wordsworth's commitment to commonness with the egalitarian, democratic agenda of religious enthusiasm and its plebeian idiom. While valuing a genuine simplicity, he was concerned to preserve the distinction between a pure and dignified simplicity and the vulgar banality of popular usage. Jeffrey's 'dissenter' label also condemned the independent arrogance that asserted inner conviction over the 'common-sense' of received wisdom. It questioned a Romantic or evangelical perception of inspiration which challenged the authority of the rational intellect. Jeffrey's wariness of sentimental excess was shaped by enlightenment precepts of moderation, regulation and self-command, and his communicative criteria influenced by social enlightenment ideals of connectedness and responsibility. Wordsworth's apparent violation of these polite principles was considered to have undermined his literary respectability.

The conflicting uses and senses of 'common' in Wordsworth's verse nevertheless reveal the poet's ambivalent relationship with the concept, an ambivalence that consisted in a contradiction between the enlightenment value of social connectedness and the exclusiveness of its cultivated ideals. This was evident also in Wordsworth's promotion of a language designed to be both universal and localised in its union of the purified discourse of the more philosophically representative language with a homely, sometimes only semi-

articulate regional idiom. The latter, in what some considered the undignified commonness of an example like 'The Idiot Boy', was critically judged neither universal nor accessible.

Wordsworth's rational justification of his method in his Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* also acknowledged a need for the enthusiastic impulse of poetic and religious expression to submit to the internal legislator of critical reflection and the regulatory discipline of metre. The poet's continual revisions of his work display a technical and intellectual objectivity which suggests a progressive self-distancing from his youthful passions and visions as the early energy of inspiration subsided. The stylistic and ideological dissent which Jeffrey criticised in the young writer was progressively modified by an increased conservatism in compliance with Jeffrey's early strictures. This formalising process suggests the poet's increasing embarrassment with the stylistic irregularities and emotional coarsenesses associated with the inclusive, popular culture of religious enthusiasm.

Chapter 6

Evangelical style and sentiment in *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*

This chapter will explore the critical reception of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell* with reference to Francis Jeffrey's extended *Edinburgh* critique of the *Excursion*'s 'enthusiastic' characteristics, and the attack on *Peter Bell*'s dramatic resolution by Leigh Hunt, editor of the free-thinking weekly journal, *The Examiner*.¹ It will extend and adjust the emphasis of the previous chapter's stylistic critique to focus on the critical perception of 'pulpit' rhetoric in *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*. This rhetoric can be characterised as the 'verbosity' which combined plainness with an inflated religious idiom employed to didactic ends. *Peter Bell* was allied to the *Lyrical Ballads* in choice of subject and style, having originally been conceived at the same time as the earlier collection was published, and some of the criticism of *Bell*'s 'common' features resembles that directed against the *Ballads*. However, as I shall explore, Hunt also registered concerns about other Methodist qualities in the poem's style and didactic structure. The discussion argues that the critical objections to such features reflected a discomfort with the discourse of religious enthusiasm.

¹ Francis Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *The Edinburgh Review* (November 1814). [Full ref., p. 2, fn. 4]; Leigh Hunt, *Peter Bell*, a Lyrical Ballad, by Wm. Wordsworth, *The Examiner*. No. 592 (May 2, 1819), 282-83.

I shall also consider how the concerns of critics were replicated in Wordsworth's own uneasiness about the style and theme of *Peter Bell*, published after twenty years of revisionary redrafting, and suggest how this ambivalence was expressed in correspondence and assertive defences of the poem. Since *itinerancy* was central to the method of missionary Methodism, the chapter will explore what the itinerant narrative structure and moral theme of both *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell* may indicate of Wordsworth's receptivity to aspects of popular evangelism. An analysis of some of the language from *The Excursion* should reveal Wordsworth's complex and uncertain attitude to the philosophical independence and social displacement which the concept of itinerancy simultaneously enshrines.

Methodist verbiage in 'The Excursion'

Twelve years after his critical response to the affected plainness of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, Jeffrey condemned Wordsworth's *Excursion* in terms which explicitly invoked Methodist enthusiasm.

Moral and religious enthusiasm, though undoubtedly poetical emotions, are at the same time dangerous inspirers of poetry; nothing being so apt to run into interminable dulness or mellifluous extravagance, without giving the unfortunate author the slightest intimation of his danger. His laudable zeal for the efficacy of his preachments, he very naturally mistakes for the ardour of poetic inspiration; - All sorts of commonplace notions and expressions are sanctified in his eyes, by the sublime ends for which they are employed; and the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit is repeated,

till the speaker entertains no doubts that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion.²

The remark illustrates the stylistic basis of Jeffrey's condemnation of enthusiasm. He clearly identified enthusiasm with a spiritual and moral zeal inspiring the exalted sentiments associated with poetry, but saw these same sentiments exhibited in a vulgar rhetoric. Although he would accept that true poetry must be inspired by powerful emotion, he believed it necessary to exercise a rational restraint not naturally found in enthusiasm inspired by religious sentiment. In its traditional relationship to fanaticism, the latter was felt to encourage an emotionally inflated mode of expression offensive both to good sense and taste. Other contemporary reviews of Wordsworth's *Excursion* similarly regretted the poet's apparent preference for the crudities of more common or enthusiastic diction which offended formal aesthetic principles 'and may be ascribed to Mr. Wordsworth's want of classic taste, and his ignorance, real or affected, of what constitutes the true dignity and charm of poetry'.³

The expression, 'the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit' has different connotations. In its dual connotation of verbosity and foliage, 'verbiage' recalls critical references to the enthusiast's 'copious fluency of words', suggestive both of fertility and superfluity.⁴ As such, the word expresses the ambivalent response to the creative yet uncontrolled energy of the enthusiastic orator and to creative or religious inspiration. In conjunction with 'verbiage', 'mystical' also implies that the moral and spiritual rhetoric in

² Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, pp. 238-39.

³ Unattributed review (Aug. 1815), *The Augustan Review*, pp. 344-56 (p. 352).

⁴ [Anonymous author], *A Dissuasive against Enthusiasm* (1708).

which Wordsworth attempted to communicate sublime abstractions lacked the rational precision required for communicative clarity, something Jeffrey had been educated to consider a primary literary precept.⁵ Since the emotions proceed from the defective self - knowledge implied in: 'he mistakes for the ardour of poetic inspiration', they lacked the modest simplicity associated with truthfulness.

'Mystical' denotes the poetic expression of the numinous, but as used by Jeffrey, suggests a pretentious obscurity, both conceptually and linguistically. It implies the presumptuous communion with the divine supposed to characterise the enthusiast and an attempt to communicate a conception of the sublime as privately perceived and manifested outside the doctrinal framework of received religion. A rejection of this poetic mysticism acknowledges the dangerous potential of that common faculty of poetic and religious enthusiasm, Imagination, for deception, as well as transfiguration, an affinity strengthened by the Romantic identification of Imagination with Soul. Jeffrey's intellectual impatience with *The Excursion*'s religiosity echoes the sentiments implicit in the dictum of Henry Mackenzie that his periodical *The Mirror*, one of the Scottish forerunners of *The Edinburgh*, should avoid discussing 'matters of religion, especially when it was mystic or controversial'.⁶ The inward, experiential character of popular evangelism would seem to fit this category.

Wordsworth certainly used religious language to express his exalted perception of poetic inspiration. Poetic and religious inspiration is combined in his elevated claim in the first book of *The Excursion*:

⁵ Philip Flynn, 'Francis Jeffrey and the Scottish Critical Tradition', *British Romanticism and the Edinburgh Review* (p. 14).

⁶ Henry Mackenzie, *Works*, 8 vols (Edinburgh, 1808), IV, 175. See also the discussion of Mackenzie in Mee, *Romanticism*, pp. 46-7.

Oh! Many are the Poets that are sown
By Nature; Men endowed with highest gifts,
The vision and the faculty divine ⁷

This claim to divine favour and visionary authority echoes the self-important delusions of the religious enthusiast. The choice of an expression like ‘sown/By Nature’ nevertheless suggests the natural, rather than doctrinal source of this religious enthusiasm, though with the supernatural externalisation of the ‘divine’ creative muse. He invokes divine guidance for his poetic enterprise and seems to claim holy status in the prayer with which he prefaces *The Excursion*: ‘*So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard/ Holiest of men*’.⁸ Wordsworth’s use of the word ‘divine’ proclaims the spiritual brotherhood of poetic and religious inspiration. Although the language is religious, the source of the poet’s spiritual inspiration is not precisely identified:

*To these emotions, whenceso’er they come,
Whether from breath of outward circumstance,
Or from the Soul – an impulse to herself* (p. 39, l. 10-12)

He avoids an overtly religious frame of reference in an emphasis on the guiding spirit from within and, in his reference to the Soul as ‘an impulse to

⁷ *The Excursion by William Wordsworth*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 39, l. 81-3.

⁸ *Excursion*, ‘Preface’, p. 39, l. 24-25.

herself', expresses his independence of the formal doctrine and language one might associate with the Methodist pulpit, though it could also demonstrate the mystical vagueness of Methodist discourse. Any doctrinal framework is nevertheless decisively rejected in Wordsworth's declaration of spiritual independence:

Jehovah - with his thunder, and the choir

Of shouting angels, and the empyreal thrones,

I pass them unalarmed

(p. 40, l. 33-35).

This rejection of traditional biblical frames of reference and the authority they represent would seem to claim a more elemental and personal source of spiritual inspiration. Wordsworth's apparently independent creed may merely have disguised a commonplace morality however. Jeffrey's critical use of the word 'preachments' evokes a conventional evangelical didacticism which rhetorically and laboriously imposes on the reading public the platitudinous truth, 'neither more nor less than the old familiar one, that a firm belief in the providence of a wise and beneficent Being must be our great stay and support under all afflictions and perplexities on earth'.⁹

A central didactic medium of Methodism was the itinerant preacher who disseminated the Christian message and defined the restless expansiveness of the movement. Although, for Methodists, itinerancy revived the method of the early apostolic mission, it generated controversy and unease amongst the

⁹ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, Edinburgh, p. 240.

settled laity and clergy. The next section will examine the itinerant narrative framing of *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*. I will explore affinities in the peripatetic, or 'pedestrian' inspiration of Wordsworth's poetic, and the independent spirit of field evangelism.

Subversive itinerancy

The itinerancy of the youthful Wanderer in *The Excursion* could signal an arrogant rejection of the social community and the responsibilities which membership of this community entailed. The practice of itinerancy had subversive, even demonic associations for Anglican vicar Richard Graves. As he remarks in his 1773 Preface to *The Spiritual Quixote*: 'Our modern itinerant reformers, by the mere force of imagination, have conjured up the powers of darkness in an enlightened age'. For Graves, itinerant preachers were 'acting in defiance of human laws, without any apparent necessity, or divine commission'.¹⁰

As various writers have explored, walking in itself has often been perceived as a radically independent stance, associated as it is with social protest and, in the case of *The Excursion*'s Solitary, with political disaffection.¹¹ A number of titles of Wordsworth's poems, from the early 'Evening Walk' to *The Excursion*, implicitly celebrate movement and the associated concept of freedom and independence. Indeed, the regular, measured rhythm of his blank verse or ballad metre replicates his meditative walking and composition. The

¹⁰ Graves, *The Spiritual Quixote*, p. 40.

¹¹ See, for example, Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) which explores the historical relationship of walking to political and social independence.

creative output of the Romantic and Methodist itinerant also testifies to the way in which physical mobility liberates and stimulates both body and mind.

John Wesley, who attributed his bodily and mental health to perpetual activity, composed many of his sermons on horseback on his itinerant circuit, while the metrical and narrative movement of Wordsworth's verse was typically inspired by rural excursion. There is nevertheless something potentially threatening in a creativity which operates outside the 'civilised' boundaries of a formal sedentary context and obeys the unpredictable natural laws of change and movement. The itinerancy of the Romantic pedestrian and Methodist missionary was impelled by the same restless energy. In his zealous youth, John Wesley had portentously declared, 'Leisure and I have now taken leave of each other.'¹² It was a fact confirmed by Samuel Johnson, who admitted, in some exasperation, 'John Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to be off somewhere.'¹³ Nor did Wesley's later assertion: 'all the world is my parish', suggest any intent to limit the scope of his activity.¹⁴ Early in the next century, Methodist preacher Jabez Bunting represented himself as a wanderer in his remark: 'As a Methodist preacher, I consider myself to be emphatically a stranger & a pilgrim upon earth', where 'wanderer' combines the concepts of solitary missionary and social outcast.¹⁵

Wordsworth's fascination with the itinerant lifestyle and identification with the independent impulse that drove it is evident in the way that the Wanderer,

¹² J. Wesley to Revd. Samuel Wesley, Jnr, Mon. May 22nd, 1727, *Letters, I, 1721-1739*, XXV, 223.

¹³ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1778), Ch. 32, p. 42.

¹⁴ Wesley, Letter (date and recipient unknown) copied in Journal entry, Mon June 11th, 1739, *Journals II*, p. 67.

¹⁵ Letter by Jabez Bunting to Whitaker, n.d., but probably 1801 or 1802, *Bunting's Correspondence*, ed. by W. R. Ward, Methodist Archive and Research Centre, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

Solitary and Poet each represent facets of himself and articulate his personal aspirations and frustrations. Hazlitt's interpretation of this as 'three Persons in one poet' neatly encapsulates this self-reflection and, in the mischievous Trinitarian analogy, its self-aggrandisement.¹⁶ The pedestrian quest expressed a social independence and restlessness which, with its constantly shifting physical and mental perspective, presented a libertarian challenge to settled securities.

For Francis Jeffrey, the concept of itinerancy and the itinerant more broadly denoted all those who departed from their appointed social and occupational spheres on independent missions which claimed new cultural and political territory. As he derisively declares in an 1803 review of Thelwall's *Poems*: 'shoe makers and tailors astonish the world with plans for reforming the constitution, and with effusions of relative and social feeling'.¹⁷ This itinerancy was the threatening physical, social and cultural mobility of the *mobile vulgus*. Indeed, the common missionary enthusiast might even be considered to be travelling sympathetically and culturally to the East by abandoning the civilized traditions of Western culture for the zealous convictions of 'the enthusiasts on the banks of the River Ganges'.¹⁸ The superstitious extravagances of Orientalism were not uncommonly equated with the sensuous and emotional excesses of Methodist evangelism. They were the faults attributed by Jeffrey both to Robert Southey's Oriental *Thalaba* and the more homely inspiration of Wordsworth's *Ballads*. At the same time, the Methodist missionary enterprise was literally to mobilize the 'vulgar' into foreign parts

¹⁶ Hazlitt, 'Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's poem The Excursion', *William Hazlitt: The Complete Works*, ed. by P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930-1934), IV, 111-125 (p. 113).

¹⁷ Jeffrey, [Review] *Poems* by Thelwall, *Edinburgh Review*, 2 (1803), pp. 197-201 (p. 200).

¹⁸ James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (London, 1791), p. 166.

and expand the sphere of private devotion into an internationally public arena. This dramatic extension of the movement was a fact confirmed by Richmond Nolley, one of the many circuit riders of early nineteenth century American Methodism, who responded to a disgruntled settler attempting in vain to escape the Methodist missionary: 'My friend, go where you may, you will find Methodist preachers. If you go to heaven, you will find them there, if you go to hell, I am afraid you will find some there'.¹⁹ The global expanse of Methodism is a fact affirmed in David Hempton's choice of title *The Empire of the Spirit* for his recent study of the movement.

The practice of itinerant preaching challenged cultural preconceptions and destabilised social hierarchies by conferring on the uneducated enthusiast an authoritative oracular voice. Jeffrey derides the incongruous circumstance of a wandering pedlar accustomed to 'higgle about brass sleeve-buttons' assuming a philosophical and parsonic authority.²⁰ For Jeffrey, a truthful representation of human character and motive was also a moral position denoting a sincere imaginative connection influenced by genuine sentiment rather than sentimental idealisation, and so observing the 'taste' of realistic restraint. The persuasive rhetoric of the travelling salesman had the troubling - and embarrassing - potential to shade into the language of the itinerant evangelist. In her philosophical analysis, *Romantic Vagrancy*, Celeste Langan inserts an introductory quote:

Unfortunately for culture and good taste, the salesman always cruelly parodies the preacher – without being able to help doing so, - for his

¹⁹ Quoted in article from *That Fighting Spirit of Methodism*, by Paul Neff Garber (North Carolina: Piedmont Press, 1928).

²⁰ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, Edinburgh, p. 267.

cultural history has dictated to the salesman the rhetorical style of the missionary.²¹

In this view, both salesman and preacher are selling a commodity or a vision driven by a mission to convince and convert. As such, they might seem to represent the didacticism of the increasingly commercial and populist culture which Jeffrey attempted to resist, and was felt to degrade purer literary standards and purposes. Jon Mee remarks on the populist affinity of these persuasive modes in his observation that 'The shop-man poet and the cobbler-preacher were regarded as intrinsically related phenomena for the *Edinburgh Review*.'²²

The poem's description of the Wanderer-pedlar recalls the familiar image of the enthusiastic visionary:

Rapt into still communion that transcends
The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
That made him; it was blessedness and love!

(p. 55, l.236-239.)

The elevated style employed the terms familiar within enthusiastic religious discourse: 'communion', 'transcends', 'thanksgiving', 'blessedness', and with the emotional intensity of that discourse, heightened by emphatic punctuation.

²¹ Philip Rieff, Introduction to *Freud: Therapy and Technique*, quoted by Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 225.

²² Mee, 'Policing Enthusiasm', p. 193.

The modifier, '*still* communion' nevertheless signals an internally reflective enthusiasm in contrast with the strident enthusiasm of public declaration. Coleridge made a careful distinction between these forms of enthusiasm in order to distance a meditative, creative inspiration from the coarser raptures of the unreflecting, self-advertising religious enthusiast.²³ Despite the mystical language, the moral and spiritual enthusiasm which Wordsworth expresses is explicitly non-doctrinal, 'transcending the imperfect offices of prayer and praise'. As such, it might seem more suggestive of Lamb's '*Natural Methodism*' than the 'verbiage of the Methodist pulpit', which evokes sectarian cant. At the same time, the suggestion that the Wanderer could 'transcend the *imperfect offices* of prayer and praise' is in itself an enthusiastic presumption denoting a reliance on inner light over devotional practice.

Wordsworth relates the Wanderer's communion with the natural sublime:

[...] his spirit drank

The spectacle: sensation, soul and form,

All melted into him; they swallowed up

His animal being;

(p. 54-55, l. 227-230)

In its reliance on sensory terms to express a physical and emotional self-transcendence, this description implicitly acknowledges the limitations of conventional religious discourse and doctrine. Wordsworth's use of the verb 'melted' anticipates his account of Peter Bell's emotional experience of conversion and echoes the emotional metaphor in Methodist testimonies of the

²³ See Mee's discussion of this distinction in *Romanticism*, Ch. 3.

New Birth, as in the example from Whitefield's *Journal* quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis.²⁴ The relative simplicity and restraint of the language also suggests the author's genuine imaginative engagement with the experience described.

[...] In the woods

A lone Enthusiast, and among the fields,

Itinerant in his labour[...]

[...] there he kept

In solitude and solitary thought

His mind in a just equipoise of love

(Bk. I, pp. 58-59, l. 376-384).

This representation of the Wanderer nevertheless expresses the solitary contemplative enthusiasm of a naturally spiritual communion, distinct and separate from the more assertive, and problematic, enthusiasm of public declaration. The quests of the *Excursion*'s Wanderer and Solitary remain essentially personal with the wandering to some extent performing a self-sufficient therapeutic end. They may pursue the internal spiritual pilgrimage of the Methodist itinerant in the isolated, natural context, but the authority which the introspective solitary, or 'Lone Enthusiast' is made to carry is far removed from the social connectedness which was a defining feature of the evangelistic Methodist Connexion achieved through a broad communal and administrative network. The focused walking of Wesleyan itinerancy should be distinguished

²⁴ For examples of the New Birth experience, see Ch. 1, pp. 22-25.

from an escapist wandering, or, indeed, the leisured rambling of the landscape tourist inspired by a Romantic appreciation of the natural sublime.

The Excursion explains how the central characters' solitary philosophical quests involved abandoning formal institutional loyalties. In later years the Wanderer remembers 'with gratitude, and reverential thoughts' the pious guidance of 'The Scottish Church' which, with 'the strong hand of her purity' had supplied a moral framework for his growing years. This Presbyterian authority had also had an oppressive and constricting impact, however. Their doctrine provoked the sombre reflection of 'fear or darker thought', a sterner influence 'melted all away' by positive spiritual impulses from a more natural source. Such impulses were inspired by 'grace' and sentiments of 'awe', but obeyed the dictates of the Wanderer's 'own pure heart' encouraged by habits of 'wandering out of doors/ By loneliness and goodness', in a religion 'self taught as of a dreamer in the woods'.²⁵

The Solitary, too, in common with the younger Wordsworth, abandoned the ministerial career to which he had been duly called in order to pursue ideals of political emancipation in France - 'a glorious opening , the unlooked for dawn' (p. 83, l. 224). Doctrinal structures were respected but perceived as incapable of satisfying a restless need for deeper personal fulfilment. Yet the Solitary emphasises the disillusionment which succeeded his initial idealism, and drove him to a reclusive existence:

The glory of the time fading away,

[...] this gone, therewith he lost

²⁵ *Excursion*, Bk. I, p. 60, l. 404-440.

All joy in human nature

(Bk. II, p. 85, l. 308, 311-312)

In his old age, he gives an impression of clerical sobriety in his 'plain garb', 'Such as might suit a rustic sire, prepared/For sabbath duties' (Bk. I, p. 60, l. 453-455). The narrative as a whole also remains situated within the orthodox context of an Anglican parsonage, its confessions filtered through the perspective of its benign incumbent.

The concept of a journey or pilgrimage is obviously central to Christian thought and iconography as in iconic texts like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and also supplies the narrative frame of much Romantic poetry. For the Lake Poets, the journey, both physically and metaphorically, involved inevitable challenges, scaling heights and traversing dangerous passes to win the visionary truth concealed by mists and distances. The Christian journey, however, is intentionally purposeful, if challenging. Wordsworth's term 'wanderer' suggests by contrast, or in moral or scriptural metaphor, a straying from the path, 'wandering in error'. More dramatically, the term conjures a traveller stranded in a wilderness of self-doubt or disillusionment or a Romantic pilgrim liberated from formal constraints, yet disenfranchised. In this sense, the Romantic vagrant, even the idealistic, youthful itinerant performing 'priestly offices' in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, is more akin to the lost soul of scriptural parable awaiting transformative revelation. The spiritual and moral quest of Wordsworth's fictional or personal wandering requires an emotional home or fulfilment which, in Christian tradition, is supplied by the promise of heaven. The homeless wandering of the erring soul therefore constitutes the inner journey of Romanticism's visionary aspiration.

The questing uncertainty implicit in the word 'Wanderer' is evident also in Wordsworth's ambivalent attitude toward the journeyman philosopher. On the one hand, this independent quest could offer the invigorating prospects of discovery expressed in *The Prelude*: 'The earth is all before me' (Bk. I, p. 107, l. 15). On the other hand, the wandering image could express the condition of fallen man condemned to wander the earth. The youthful excursions which Wordsworth dramatised in his poems or recorded from his own experience were idealistic but exploratory. He asserts a firm purpose, insisting he, unlike Adam and Eve, was not 'scar'd' at the unknown challenge of life's journey. The conviction sometimes faltered, however:

Trances of thought and mountings of the mind

Come fast upon me..

and must be reinvigorated:

it is shaken off (Bk. I, p. 107, l. 20-21).

Coleridge was aware of the destabilising effect of venturing too far outside the boundaries of established practices, or into new regions of creative experiment, reasoning that if the poet wandered beyond the limits of his 'natural Element', he became diseased; he had lost his anchor and repose.²⁶ Wordsworth's claim that *The Prelude* was intended to 'fix the wavering balance of [my] mind' suggested that wandering might be a symptom of restlessness but, offering

²⁶ Coleridge, *Letters*, II, 1013.

release and peace from institutional constraints, supplied a *cure* for discontent.²⁷

There are many indications in Wordsworth's poetry that the independent isolation of the wandering lifestyle could be oppressive in the mental and emotional self-reliance it demanded and the introspection it encouraged. It renders one vulnerable to the extremes of joy and despondency to which itinerant evangelists and any engaged on a private spiritual journey are equally susceptible.

As high as we have mounted in delight

In our dejection do we sink as low;

[...] And fears and fancies thick upon me came

Dim sadness – and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.²⁸

The Methodist testimony of private journals similarly expressed this emotional fluctuation produced by the loneliness of the puritan's journey of self-examination and reflection. Both Charles and John Wesley recorded the feelings of self-doubt and anxiety which preceded the initial experience of conversion and from which they were not exempt afterwards: 'I rose in great heaviness', Charles records in his journal on the morning of May 28th, 1738, 'which neither private nor joint prayer could remove'.²⁹ Such confessions illustrate, however, the demands of a much more explicitly framed religious

²⁷ *Prelude*, I, p. 124, l. 651.

²⁸ 'Resolution and Independence', *Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 125, l. 25-8.

²⁹ *The Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley* (London: Mason, 1849), p. 104.

journey which should be distinguished from the vaguer forebodings which Wordsworth's social isolation incurred.

The wandering rustic philosopher also has the troubling potential to shade into the dispossessed, directionless figure of the vagrant which haunted Wordsworth's visionary landscape. The poet attempted to distance himself from this troubling image in a deliberate refinement of the self-reflective Wanderer and Pedlar and from his self-representation as a 'dedicated spirit' in *The Prelude*.³⁰ His description of the leech-gatherer in 'Resolution and Independence' gives a disquieting impression of isolation and displacement.³¹

In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
About the moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently

(p. 129, l.136-138)

The figure of the rootless, questing solitary, by representing that elemental suffering that exists on the margins, implicitly threatens the stability of society and the self, presenting variously spectres of madness, ostracism and social destitution:

Far from the world I walk, and from all care:
But there may come another day to me-
Solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty.

³⁰ *The Prelude*, p. 159, l. 344.

³¹ *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 129, l. 136-38. Also see David Riede's discussion in *Oracles and Hierophant*, Ch. 2, 'The Oracular self: the Authority of Wordsworth'.

The independent traveller is precariously positioned between the strength of freedom and the vulnerability of social isolation. Embedded in Wordsworth's statement is a fearful awareness of the way in which a solitary wandering life may expose one to the privations and humiliations experienced by vagrants and the early evangelists. Wordsworth may have feared his own transmutation into missionary outcast.

Present day poet and admirer of Wordsworth, Seamus Heaney, has observed that 'Wordsworth at his best, no less than at his worst, is a pedestrian poet'.³² The remark introduces a *stylistic* interpretation of pedestrianism. This quality has been associated with the metrical structure and rhythms of Wordsworth's poetry as well as with its thematic mobility. In the next section, I shall consider how Jeffrey's stylistic critique of Wordsworth's poetic reflected concerns about another kind of pedestrianism. This was the ponderous pedestrianism of a static, minutely depicted domesticity which clumsily juxtaposed plainness and verbosity. These were qualities negatively identified with the vulgar simplicities of evangelistic discourse. I shall consider how Jeffrey's own stylistic preferences in Wordsworth's *Excursion* indicate his rejection of such qualities.

³² Seamus Heaney, 'The Makings of a Music: Reflections on Wordsworth and Yeats', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 68, quoted in Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (London: Macmillan, 1997, repr. 2000), p. 90. Heaney's observation was used to support Jarvis's valuable reflections on Wordsworth's particular form of Romantic pedestrianism.

Stylistic pedestrianism in 'The Excursion'

The plainness to which Jeffrey objected in *The Excursion* was the prosaic literalness of descriptive content and language which was awkwardly combined with the other 'enthusiastic' tendency to rhetorical inflation in its 'strained raptures and fantastical sublimities'.³³ Jeffrey illustrated this characteristic with extended quoted reference to laborious sections of narrative which were slowed not just by extended sections of moral philosophy but by close attention to domestic detail 'of preposterous minuteness'.³⁴ Jeffrey derisively cited the poem's pedantically precise description of the aged Wanderer: an 'interesting personage' whom the Author encountered 'sitting with his eyes half shut', and whom, 'with his own delightful simplicity', he engaged in conversation:

At length I hailed him – seeing that his hat
Was moist with water drops, as if the brim
Had newly scooped a running stream!‘ [...]
[...] “’Tis,” said I “a burning day;
My lips are parched with thirst, but you, I guess,
Have somewhere found relief.”

(p. 61, I, l. 476-482.).

³³ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 241.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

Such descriptive content, for Jeffrey, combines plainness with the prolixity of superfluous detail and length: 'long words, long sentences and unwieldy phrases'.³⁵ This is the verbosity of exhaustive, literal minutiae rather than rhetorical exuberance. In Jeffrey's view, Wordsworth's preference for the commonplace confers an absurdly false solemnity on insignificant incidents and characters and undermines the dignity of the message and medium. Jeffrey evidently considers affected and presumptuous the assumption that such apparently banal detail can be dignified by the 'sublime ends' to which the poem was directed. Similar complaints were levelled against the religious enthusiast's 'copious Fluency of Words'.³⁶

In his largely negative review, Jeffrey nevertheless acknowledges Wordsworth's empathetic connection with human experience that demonstrated his knowledge of the human heart. The passages which seem for him to 'sparkle like gems in a desert' are conspicuous for a dignity of style and sentiment that appeal both to the affections and the philosophical intellect. For Jeffrey, this combined appeal fulfils the noble function of poetry.³⁷ He favours lines which express a meditative detachment and reflectiveness:

And when the flood which overflows the soul has passed away,
a consciousness remains that it has left deposited upon the silent
shore of memory

of images and precious thoughts that cannot die and shall not be
destroyed.

³⁵ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 238.

³⁶ See Jeffrey's quoted remark on p. 167 in this chapter; *Dissuasive against Enthusiasm*, p. 45.

³⁷ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 265.

This kind of language and sentiment observes Wordsworth's own dictum that the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' should be 'recollected in tranquillity'.³⁸

Jeffrey's praise for the elegance of the quoted lines suggests that, for him, they achieve a harmonious integration of ordered style and sentiment. The calm perspective is reflected in the sustained fluency of measured iambics remote from the irregular rhythms of uncontrolled excitement. The musical qualities Jeffrey identifies, 'the ameliorating effect of song and music' suggest both metrical harmony and a concordance of reason and emotion which reassures rather than excites or disturbs.³⁹ He also finds the lines persuasive in their sincere expression of emotional experience which has been assimilated in a way that effectively unites the subjective and objective self. The subject is not consumed by powerful feeling, but liberated by the wisdom of maturity from which the flood of passion has receded. This is the controlled enthusiasm of an emotion which sustains and renews, rather than destabilises. It is the meditative, mature enthusiasm which Coleridge honoured and attempted to distinguish from 'the instinctual and unreflective passions' of unregulated enthusiasm and religious fanaticism.⁴⁰

Jeffrey praises other lines for the severer, manly dignity of style and sentiment, admiring the 'sterner and more majestic beauty' of examples like:

Earth is sick,

³⁸ 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by E. de Selincourt, new edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 740.

³⁹ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 265

⁴⁰ Mee, *Romanticism*, p. 151.

And Heav'n is weary of the hollow words
Which States and Kingdoms utter when they speak
Of Truth and Justice.⁴¹

With the classical formality of its capitalised abstract nouns, this poetry expresses a philosophical detachment which, in its imitation of the 'weightier diction of Cowper', may seem to honour the serious role of poetry and avoid any spurious pretence at identification with humble experience or emotions. Jeffrey could be moved by Wordsworth's personal expression of the tender feelings and his capacity to communicate this in other imagined experiences but he objected to the implausibility of a journeyman assuming the role of a philosopher - unpersuasive, for him, in being rooted neither in personal knowledge or observation

Although David Nichol Smith claims that Jeffrey's objections to Wordsworth's rhetoric in *The Excursion* were rooted in a refusal to 'accept the creed that our most vital knowledge is revealed to us by our *feelings*', it is probably not accurate to assume that Jeffrey denied the emotional origin of our profoundest insights.⁴² The passages he selected for special praise from *The Excursion* instead illustrate his receptivity to powerful expressions of genuine feeling and moral sensibility. At the same time it is important to note that the sentiments in his chosen passages are moving largely because of the rational restraint of the language. Jeffrey is primarily critical of what he considered simulated or artificially inflated emotion. His stylistic choices in *The Excursion*

⁴¹ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 266.

⁴² David Nichol Smith, *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism* (London: Frowde, 1910), xiv.

reflect a formal preference for classical elegance and restraint remote from the extremities of the 'enthusiastic' style. He favours the dignified moral sentiments of enlightenment tradition over the declamatory zeal and mysticism of the popular pulpit.

As suggested in observations by Carlyle, Jeffrey was warily sceptical of over-intensity, and in conversation would seem to have avoided emotional self-exposure. Carlyle expressed his exasperation at Jeffrey's determined 'lightness', admitting that he was 'exceedingly pleasant in light talk – yet alas! Light, light, too light. He will talk of nothing *earnestly*, though his look sometimes betrays an earnest feeling'. Jeffrey reciprocated by advising Carlyle not to be so 'dreadfully in earnest' himself. Carlyle's criticism and Jeffrey's response suggests the latter's embarrassed anxiety to correct any enthusiastic tendencies in himself. It is likely that in common with other literary commentators, Jeffrey also had an aversion to the lack of humour and introspective intensity negatively identified with religious enthusiasm by critics like Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt.⁴³

The Embarrassment of Methodist enthusiasm in 'Peter Bell'

In view of Jeffrey's criticisms of Wordsworth's sermonising style, I intend to consider what his poem *Peter Bell* suggests of the poet's attitude to pulpit rhetoric and to the preaching style of Methodism in particular. The eponymous hero's final dramatic 'conversion' by a Methodist preacher makes this tale

⁴³ Nichol Smith, *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism*, p. xviii.

particularly relevant to the discursive theme of the thesis. This narrative resolution invites us to gauge the extent of the poet's empathy both with revivalist zeal and with the simple passions of the 'common man'. The social and cultural dimension of the poem's Methodist element has been little studied by critics in comparison with its more fantastic supernatural dimension. However, in view of the criticism which it attracted from reviewers like Leigh Hunt, the Methodist component would seem to demand closer examination. It also seems significant that when, in later years, Francis Jeffrey modified his more severe judgement of Wordsworth's poetry, admitting that his censure of the poems may now be thought to be 'a great deal too harsh and uncharitable', he maintained his negative opinion of *Peter Bell*.⁴⁴ Jeffrey was by no means alone in his views; the poem attracted the adverse criticism which Wordsworth had himself nervously anticipated. *The Monthly Review* of August 1819, for example, judged the poem "an infantine pamphlet", scolding its author with a concluding, "Fie, fie, Mr. Wordsworth!"⁴⁵

Perhaps the most telling evidence of the poet's own ambivalence towards the poem's theme and style is the extended length of time - about twenty years - which he took to complete it. Dorothy's entry in the *Alfoxden Journal* for April 20th 1798: 'Peter Bell begun', indicates when Wordsworth started work on the poem, though as John Jordan suggests, it is likely to have been conceived before this date.⁴⁶ However, the poem was only published in 1819, the intervening period having been devoted to much laborious revision and deletions. Although Wordsworth had intended to include *Peter Bell* in the

⁴⁴ Nichol Smith, *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism*, p. xiv.

⁴⁵ Quoted, J. E. Jordan, 'The Hewing of Peter Bell', *Studies in English Literature*, 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn 1967), VII, 559-603 (p. 598).

⁴⁶ *Peter Bell*, by William Wordsworth: ed. by Jordan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

original edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*, with which it accorded thematically and stylistically, he decided that further modification was required before it was acceptable for publication.⁴⁷ One can only speculate on why the poet was less confident with the poem than with those like 'The Idiot Boy' or 'The Mad Mother' which explored uncomfortable or challenging themes in simple language and rugged syntax, and proved similarly controversial. One can also not be sure whether he was more anxious about the reception of the poem's theme or its language, though records of later revisions suggest that he felt that both needed modification.

In the long process of the poem's preparation, Wordsworth had attempted to promote it privately to those he judged likely to be sympathetic. He evidently hoped for Coleridge's approval by including it in the selection of his poems he gave to him to take to Malta in 1804, and elsewhere shared with him some of the process of its laborious composition. Earlier, in the Spring of 1798, Wordsworth read what would have been a very early version of the ballad to Coleridge and the young William Hazlitt during the latter's visit to Alfoxton. As Hazlitt related years after the event, the poet delivered it expressively in the open air. It may seem appropriate that Wordsworth chose to deliver the poem in a context and a manner which suited both its dramatic location and the style of its moral rhetoric. With the ironic insight of subsequent knowledge, Hazlitt wryly observed how 'the comment made upon it by his face and voice was very different from that of some later critics'.⁴⁸

Wordsworth himself had misgivings about the 1798 version later, admitting in a letter to Coleridge in early 1799 :

⁴⁷ See Jordan's comments in his Introduction to *Peter Bell*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Hazlitt, 'On My First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 106-122 (p.118).

I have lately been employ'd in hewing down P.B., with another dressing I think he will do. He has risen in my esteem. Heaven knows there was need. The third part I think interesting a praise which I give myself with more pleasure as I know that in general, I can lay claim to it.⁴⁹

The comment is revealing in several ways. Firstly, it expresses a curiously personal relationship with the poem and its hero which, in the poet's use of the personal pronoun, are seen as synonymous. It demonstrates Wordsworth's ambivalent relationship with a character with whom he was tempted to identify, but who was felt to need a more polite presentation for a potentially critical public. In a letter to Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth claimed that the character of Peter Bell was based on the countenance, gait and figure of a 'wild rover' with whom I walked from Builth, on the river Wye [...] to Hay'.⁵⁰ Admitting that he had always been attracted to 'this class of people', he claimed that 'It has always been a pleasure to me through life to catch at every opportunity that has occurred in my rambles of becoming acquainted' with them. At the same time, however, his language expresses the imaginative curiosity of social and cultural distance. I shall consider how closely the poet identified with the sentiments and specifically the Methodist enthusiasm of the poem, and how far he sought to maintain a critical detachment.

The fluctuating nature of Wordsworth's emotional response to his poem revealed in his comment to Coleridge reflects the complex and ambivalent relationship between the rational detachment of the craftsman and the more

⁴⁹ Wordsworth to Coleridge, 27 February 1799, *Letters*, I, 222.

⁵⁰ *Fenwick Notes*, ed. Curtis, p.70.

personal engagement of the imaginative creator. It represents the tension between the simultaneous need for emotional fulfilment and technical objectivity which characterises the dilemma of enthusiasm for the responsible artist. Wordsworth's alternating praise and censure for the poem suggest a parent's apologetic defence for a loved but potentially embarrassing adolescent child. His admission to being able to 'lay little claim' to praise reveals an uncharacteristic self-deprecation that reflects his insecurity. Wordsworth may have anticipated criticism on a number of counts. His defence of his hero is likely to have been influenced by Jeffrey's criticisms of his preference for the 'common' in *The Lyrical Ballads*, not in the sense of the simplicity of shared, familiar experience, but the degrading commonness of meanness and banality. And Peter's aberrant eccentricity would be seen to render him less ordinary and accessible than the more conventional subjects of 'polite' rustic poems.

As time went on, Wordsworth's professed fondness for the poem was increasingly overlaid by an anxiety to adapt it to polite public taste, which resulted in increasing detachment from its original aims and spirit in what could be seen as a capitulation to the enemies of popular enthusiasm. This concern to avoid offending the educated reader was also expressed in Wordsworth's amendments of the poem's language and syntax in accordance with more conventional standards of poetic elegance. Henry Crabb Robinson recorded Wordsworth's anxious preoccupation with the poem and the lack of confidence it suggested:

We talked of our expected journey. He was, however, more occupied

about the new edition of P.B. He has resolved to make some concessions to public taste, and has resolved to strike out several offensive passages such as 'Is it a party in a parlour etc ' So the over coarse expressions, 'But I will bang your bones etc. I never before saw Wordsworth so little opinionated.⁵¹

Ironically, the terms deleted could be felt to be more realistic examples of the everyday vernacular - the 'real language of men' which Wordsworth had originally declared his intention to reproduce. The offending lines also possess a rhythmic and alliterative vigour which express a homely vitality not inappropriate for the context. However, as discussed in Chapter 5, Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* had expressed his sense of the need to refine and smooth commonplace crudities and improprieties.

Despite his sarcastic deference, in the excisions referred to by Crabb Robinson, to the 'pious sensibilities' of his educated readers, Wordsworth's 'hewing' of *Peter Bell* showed increasing concern to adapt his stylistic register to prevailing standards of decorum. John Jordan's account of the extended gestation of *Peter Bell* suggests that while the earlier, and by implication, less mature Wordsworth may have been comfortable with the poem's experimental 'crudities', the more discerning, 'later Wordsworth was not', and he therefore applied his critical scalpel to the text. When relating how the poet had claimed that the idea for the poem was stimulated by reading a newspaper article that 'shocked him into superrational and supernatural awarenesses', Jordan reasoned that 'shock also produces crudity and plain men can be vulgar'.⁵²

Here the instantaneous emotional response is seen to represent a crudely

⁵¹ Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, 1. 241.

⁵² Jordan, 'Hewing of Peter Bell', p. 560.

instinctual reflex. 'Shock' also evokes the impact of supernatural revelation to which religious enthusiasts laid claim and which provoked similarly cautious and sceptical reactions. Jordan's assessment reflects the critical consensus of Wordsworth's contemporaries. It was one which the poet came increasingly to share although he was perhaps reluctant to fully admit. The poet's corrective adjustments to *Peter Bell* might seem to reflect the progressive modification of his early independent stance in an increasing concern to avoid being identified with the spirit and style of simple enthusiasm.

Wordsworth felt the need to personally justify and explain his thematic and stylistic choices in *Peter Bell* in anticipation of a critical reception. The explanatory letter with which Wordsworth, in 'an odd shy way', as Leigh Hunt expresses it, recommended the poem to Robert Southey, emphasises the 'pains' he had taken in the preparation of the poem 'to make the production less *unworthy of a favourable reception*'.⁵³ The cautious understatement betrays Wordsworth's insecurity. It might have reflected his sense of the challenge which the simple language and humble theme could present to the polite reader, or an awareness of the potential controversy in the 'enthusiastic' character of the tale's dramatic resolution.

Wordsworth's indirect reference to Peter's personal enlightenment as the operation of imagination makes a careful distinction between this inward revelation and external supernatural agency. 'The poem was composed', he declared, 'under a belief that the Imagination [...] does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency'. A supernatural explanation for changes of mind and circumstance was something which Wordsworth

⁵³ Leigh Hunt, [Review] *Peter Bell*, *Examiner* (1819), p. 283.

acknowledged could be exploited with great dramatic effect by Coleridge and Southey. However, a narrative reliance on supernatural agency challenged the concept of self-determination that informed his own realistic treatment of human experience in 'incidents within the compass of poetic probability'.⁵⁴ Wordsworth was perhaps also anxious not to weaken the reputation and authority of his poetry by any apparent alliance with enthusiastic credulity. There is perhaps, however, a suggestion of defiance in his decision to publish *Peter Bell* not long after Jeffrey's derisive treatment of the Methodistical attributes of *The Excursion*.

Wordsworth's obsessive revisions of the supernatural element in *Peter Bell* reflect an uncertain sense of its propriety in a tale which purported to be morally and spiritually edifying. He may have sensed the implicit contradiction in a commitment to realism and attraction to the fantastic surreal, but attempted to integrate the two in the Prologue to the tale by investing ordinary life with wonder and mystery:

What nobler prospects than the marvels
May in life's daily prospects find,
May find or there create?

(p. 55, l. 148-150)

The poem's combination of the commonplace and the fantastic, the extreme and the banal, could seem to demonstrate a confused purpose and communicative failure of the kind which Jeffrey had identified in *The Lyrical*

⁵⁴ Wordsworth, 'Dedicatory address to Robert Southey' (April 7, 1819), *Peter Bell*, p. 41.

Ballads. The supernaturalism with which Wordsworth both identified and distanced himself was a weakness of which the Methodist visionary or convert was often accused. Wordsworth himself associated the superstitious response with men of 'slow faculties and deep feelings', which expressed the popular perception of the religious enthusiast.⁵⁵ It might be argued that for both Wordsworth and John Wesley, the rational, corrective tendency of the educated mind remained in some conflict with a capacity to sympathetically identify with the credulous and ardent spirit.

Wordsworth's concern about the reception of his poem might seem to be justified by the burlesques it spawned, which seemed to confirm that its homely character invited parody. The poem's formal publication by Longman in 1819 was anticipated, two months earlier, by a Wordsworthian spoof by John Reynolds, significantly, perhaps, one of Hunt's acquaintance.⁵⁶ Percy Shelley dubbed Reynolds' version 'the ante-natal Peter' for its metrical and narrative anticipation of the actual poem. This parody also ironically guaranteed a popular readership for the original when it appeared. The publication of *Peter Bell* was followed one month later by 'Benjamin the waggoner', which appropriated Longman's inaccurate title for Wordsworth's forthcoming 'The Waggoner' in a mischievous response to Reynolds' skit.⁵⁷

Wordsworth was provoked both by parody and formal critical responses to produce a defensive justification for his poem's choice of style and hero in the form of a sonnet entitled: 'On the detraction which followed the publication of a certain poem':

⁵⁵ 'Notes' on 'The Thorn' (1800).

⁵⁶ John Hamilton Reynolds, *Peter Bell: A Lyrical Ballad* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819).

⁵⁷ *Literary Gazette*, June 19th (1819), p. 400, cited in 'The "Peter Bell" Parodies of 1819', George L. Marsh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), p. 267.

Not negligent the style; - the matter?-good

As aught that song records of Robin Hood;

This rhetorical defence displays on Wordsworth's part an imaginative detachment which indicates an embarrassed reluctance to appear to identify too intimately with the simple sentiments of the rustic enthusiast. In response to those who, like Leigh Hunt:

Waxed wroth, and with foul claws a harpy brood,

On bard and hero clamorously fell,

Wordsworth assumes an embarrassed levity but evidently feels the need to elevate and dignify both the stature of his hero and the moral message of the tale.⁵⁸

Wordsworth was generally satisfied, however, with his more realistically handled account of Bell's moral reformation in the third part of the poem which, compared with the earlier and middle sections involving the ass and its drowned master, were relatively little revised. The slight amendments nevertheless involved heightening the passion of the Methodist preacher's rhetoric by replacing the relatively mild 'pious' with the more intense, 'fervent' Methodist'. Certainly the more fantastic or absurd elements involving Bell's relationship with the ass attracted their share of derision, but the element which attracted the severest censure was the 'enthusiastic' element of Bell's Methodist conversion.

⁵⁸ First published in *River Duddon* volume, 1820; thereafter in "Miscellaneous Sonnets", XVIII.

'Another didactic little horror of Mr Wordsworth's'

Francis Jeffrey, from the liberal political perspective of *The Edinburgh*, and Leigh Hunt, from the more radical standpoint of *The Examiner*, shared a mistrust of the supposed irrationality of popular enthusiastic discourse and the way that it flouted the precepts of literary taste. Hunt's 1819 review of *Peter Bell* reserved its severest censure for the Methodist component of the story, referring to the poem with a mental shudder, as 'another didactic little horror of Mr. Wordsworth's'.⁵⁹ His hostility toward Methodism may have reflected a particular personal concern to distance himself from the coarser zeal with which his own rational radicalism was too often confounded.⁶⁰ Leigh Hunt's review reinforced criticisms of Methodism which he had already forcibly articulated in a series of essays for *The Examiner* and collected for independent publication in 1809.⁶¹ His critique of *Peter Bell* denounces the poet's use of Methodist enthusiasm as the vehicle of the hero's moral renewal, condemning what he saw as Wordsworth's irresponsible endorsement of the crude ideology and inflammatory didacticism of popular evangelism. 'We are really and most unaffectedly sorry to see an excellent poet like Mr. Wordsworth returning, in vulgar despair, to such half-witted prejudices'.⁶²

Unlike Francis Jeffrey, for whom *The Excursion* might simply have confirmed his sense of the communicative failure of *The Lyrical Ballads*,

⁵⁹ Hunt, [Review] *Excursion*, *Examiner*, 282-83 (p. 282).

⁶⁰ Ironically, the reactionary journal, *Blackwood's Magazine* (Oct. 1817), coined the term, 'The Cockney School', for all who, like Hunt, were considered to commit the offences of vulgarity and plebeian sentimentality that Hunt saw in Methodism.

⁶¹ Hunt, *The Folly and Danger of Methodism*.

⁶² Hunt, [Review] *Excursion*, *Examiner*, p. 283.

Hunt's indignation reflects a frustration with a poet whose gifts he essentially respected and whom he had earlier described as 'the most prominent ornament of the 'green and genial' 'school of poetry'.⁶³ In contrast to Jeffrey, he had responded positively to the simplicity of *The Lyrical Ballads* and was consequently disappointed in what he considered *Peter Bell*'s comparative crudity. As positive evidence of Wordsworth's ability, Hunt quoted approvingly verses in *Peter Bell* from 'a savage wildness round him hung' to 'Against the wind and open sky', which in common with Jeffrey, he favoured for their Crabbe-like qualities of strong and natural simplicity.⁶⁴ By contrast, he denounced the inflated, Methodistical rhetoric of:

Is it a fiend that to a stake

Of fire its desperate self is tethering

(p. 91, l. 551-552)

[...]

All silent and all damn'd!

(p. 61, l. 560)

Hunt may have been misled into expecting a greater maturity from the 1819 publication date of *Peter Bell*, which disguised the poem's early conception and long gestation.

⁶³ Hunt, 'Preface, including Cursory Observations on Poetry and Cheerfulness', *Foliage* (1818), pp. 9-11.

⁶⁴ Hunt, [Review] *Excursion*, *Examiner*, p. 282.

Identifying what were perceived as common, and dangerous, attributes of religious enthusiasm, Hunt argues that, far from liberating the spirit, an evangelistic creed founded on a conviction of personal sin and fear of damnation is emotionally oppressive while suppressing the rational capacity for independent thought:

All this[...]is as weak and vulgar in philosophy as can be. It is the philosophy of violence and hopelessness. It is not teaching ignorance, but scourging it. If Mr. Wordsworth means to say that fear may occasionally do good, we grant it; but we say that nine times out of ten, it does harm, and is likely to make a man's after thoughts desperate and resentful, and still oftener selfish and servile.⁶⁵

For Hunt, this suspect ideology is reflected in an equally spurious emotive rhetoric which, in 'a method prompted by bigotry and diseased impulse', irresponsibly manipulates the simple credulity of the ignorant.⁶⁶ Hunt's use of the word 'bigotry' echoes fellow *Examiner* reviewer William Hazlitt's indictment of Methodist hypocrisy in his essay 'On the Causes of Methodism', while the familiar medicinal terminology of 'diseased' expresses the perceived corruption of mental soundness and stability.⁶⁷ Hazlitt and Hunt shared an aversion to the negativity of Methodism's sin-focused creed and responded with the same spirited contempt to a movement which contradicted the

⁶⁵ Hunt, [Review] *Excursion*, *The Examiner*, p. 282.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hazlitt's 'The Causes of Methodism' was one of a series of essays which, significantly, had originally been published in *The Examiner* under Leigh Hunt's editorship, and was reissued in 1817 in the collection *The Round Table*.

‘luminous’ and liberal values of *The Examiner*. Hunt expressed the typical educated view, elsewhere endorsed by Wordsworth himself, of the need to distinguish the properly regulated emotional response from a crude and primitive emotionalism.

Although Wordsworth might maintain a personal distance from such instinctual passions, Hunt argues that the moral scheme of the tale apparently promotes and endorses them. He objects to Wordsworth’s presumptuous sermonising, echoing Jeffrey’s use of language in his choice of expression, ‘vociferating’ for the minister’s preaching, which similarly implied tedious excess. He implicitly endorses the negative estimation of the anonymous reviewer in the *Literary and Statistical Magazine for Scotland* who denounced the ‘grotesque’ character of both ‘thought and words’ which prompted the reader ‘to laugh outright’ and to ‘wonder at the marvellous incongruity of the author’s manner’.⁶⁸ The narrative poem was felt to offend the aesthetic criteria of proportion and restraint that characterised educated taste. For the formal arbiters of literary propriety, these reflected the ethical principles which Wordsworth’s crude sentiments and common discourse seemed to threaten.

Hunt’s criticism may invite us to ask whether Wordsworth’s apparent satisfaction with the religious climax of his tale was moral or artistic – whether it reflected a personal receptivity to the religious sentiment, or simply accepted its dramatic appropriateness within the narrative scheme and social context of the poem. The superstitious elements of the poem would seem compatible with what Hunt considered the ideology of primitive Methodism, while providing a truthful cultural expression of working class experience. They may therefore

⁶⁸ Anonymous reviewer, *Edinburgh Review* (Aug. 1819), pp. 314-19 (p. 315).

simply denote Wordsworth's capacity to identify imaginatively with the emotional life and religious impulses of the uneducated rustic. Although he might be imaginatively and emotionally receptive to such impulses, however, it does not follow that he would identify intellectually with the creed of popular Methodism or endorse a servile belief in a punitive supernatural agency. So what can we gauge of Wordsworth's own attitude to the sectarian enthusiasm which effected Peter Bell's moral recovery in the poem? Is the Methodist preacher simply a convenient dramatic device or does this choice of moral agent reflect a more serious respect or sympathy on the poet's part? Closer attention to the language in which Wordsworth relates Bell's conversion may give a more accurate impression of the poet's personal position.

Hunt clearly objected to what he saw as a destructive emphasis on sin with the associated inflammatory rhetoric of hellfire, whores of Babylon and other servants of evil. The repent or be damned creed which Methodism seemed to offer, in Hunt's opinion, served only to reinforce superstitious prejudices and encourage a servile belief in a punitive supernatural agency. Certainly Peter Bell is represented as superstitiously credulous in his readiness to ascribe natural phenomena to supernatural causes:

When Peter spies the withered leaf,

It yield no cure to his distress -

"Where there is not a bush or tree,

"The very leaves they follow me-

"So huge hath been my wickedness!"

(p. 115, l. 756-760)

His reactions are recorded in language of a deliberate simplicity which in its humorous effect could suggest a patronising detachment on the poet's part:

Ah, well-a-day for Peter Bell! -
He will be turned to iron soon,
Meet Statue for the court of Fear
His hat is up- and every hair
Bristles - and whitens in the moon!

(p. 93, l. 566-570)

The rhetoric which Wordsworth puts into the mouth of the preacher seems to illustrate the bludgeoning didacticism which Hunt condemned:

“Repent! Repent! Though ye have gone,
“Through paths of wickedness and woe,
“After the Babylonian harlot;
“And though your sins be red as scarlet,
“They shall be white as snow!”

(p. 137, l. 1001-1005)

This satirically exaggerated stereotype indicates Wordsworth's personal detachment from the dogmatic crudities of the religious rhetoric, but its forceful presentation implicitly acknowledges the impact of its strong and ultimately hopeful message on the simple, uneducated audience. At the time this poem was first conceived, Wordsworth, as we have seen, was also

personally less receptive to cerebral religion than to a spiritual creed which engaged the heart and imagination. He admitted to identifying with Peter Bell and may well have understood his receptivity to this personal and emotional appeal.

The sombre warning of the stanza quoted above is preceded by a more positive emphasis on salvation through love:

[...] - strive

“To love the Lord with all your might;

“Turn to him, seek him day and night”.

(p. 137, l. 997-999)

The more personal emphasis of the preacher’s invitation has replaced the more formally doctrinal exhortation in Wordsworth’s original draft of the poem:

God is a God of mercy – strive

To love him then with all your might,

Do that which lawful is and right.⁶⁹

The later version softens the religious message and acknowledges the private experience of faith that Methodism encouraged.

It is perhaps significant that the preacher first attracts Bell’s notice by the power of his delivery. A voice

⁶⁹ MS 1, *Peter Bell*, p. 441. Also discussed in Jordan, ‘The Hewing of Peter Bell’, p. 584.

Though clamorous as a hunter's horn,
Re-echoed by a naked rock,
Comes from that tabernacle – List!
Within, a fervent Methodist
Is preaching to no heedless flock!

(p. 137, l. 991-995)

'Clamorous' suggests stridency but also a forceful urgency and directness. Presumably, also, Bell, in his vulnerable state of despair, could only have been startled by such a commanding summons and forceful message as the one described in the poem. The word 'fervent' evokes the Methodist enthusiast, while 'no heedless flock' acknowledges the rapt absorption of his equally passionate listeners, the prolific use of the exclamation reinforcing the sense of excited energy. The open air, natural location, emphasised in 'naked rock', might also positively emphasise the rugged simplicity of the preacher's message and the relevance of his open air appeal to the rural labourer. Although the process of Bell's moral reformation was activated earlier through a sequence of encounters, it was consolidated by the preacher's conviction, and communicated through the physical and emotional energy which impelled an itinerant mission.

While Wordsworth could well have appreciated the pertinence of the message and method for such as Bell, however, one could argue that the deliberately simple, sometimes bathetic language maintains authorial distance and that his representation of the conversion experience has an element of caricature which does not indicate serious respect. The process of Peter's reformation is certainly expressed in superstitious terms in accordance with his

apparently limited intellect. Bell's conversion is prepared dramatically with the reference to a pious old man, 'a gentle soul / Though given to sadness and to gloom', who is startled in his devotions one night by a supernatural summons to repentance (p. 117, l. 786-7):

The godly book was in his hand –
And on the page, more black than coal,
Appeared, set forth in strange array,
A word – which to his dying day
Perplexed the good man's gentle soul
(p. 119, l. 801-805)

This account of spiritual revelation expresses popular Methodist belief in the insufficiency of pious practice and the need for a visionary conviction of personal sin to ensure salvation. It would also seem to endorse Hunt's negative emphasis on the agency of fear in the process of reform. It implicitly acknowledges that, in common with Methodist enthusiasm, this religious conviction was experienced internally and intuitively. The way in which the poem expresses the reforming agency of religion as the mysterious operation of the 'Spirits of the Mind' suggests the inner workings of conscience rather than external direction.

Several of the stanzas following the account of the old man's vision in Part Third begin with dramatic exclamations:

'Dread Spirits!...'
(p. 119, l. 811),

I know you potent Spirits! well,
How with the feeling and the sense
Playing, ye govern foes or friends
Yoked to your will, for fearful ends -
And this I speak in reverence!

(p. 121, l. 816-820)

Dread Beings!

(p. 121, l. 824)

Then coming from the wayward world,
That powerful world in which ye dwell,
Come Spirits of the Mind! And try,
To-night, beneath the moonlight sky,
What may be done with Peter Bell!

(p. 121, l. 831- 835)

The language recalls Methodist belief in the personal renewal achieved through the secret operations of the Holy Spirit. In the account of Bell's conversion, spiritual agency is expressed more in mystical, than explicitly doctrinal terms, though with incidental illustrative reference to the sacred book the old man is assumed to have been reading. Hunt clearly objected to the

pious platitudes of conversion and revelation, but in the account of Bell's reformation, conventional religious rhetoric is curiously combined with a vaguer supernaturalism coloured by the elemental features of the natural setting. One is prompted to ask whether Wordsworth's representation of Methodism seriously acknowledges its capacity to activate an inward process of reform, or simply supplied an institutional symbol and convenient stimulus for the inner transformation which was already underway in the renegade hero. One could also see Wordsworth as imaginatively identifying with the familiar experience of those, who in their uneducated vulnerability were deemed to be more susceptible to, and become more reliant on, the structure which a simple religious creed could supply. Within the context of Peter Bell's story, the religious message satisfies a simple but urgent moral need, and as such was an effective instrument for the character's redemption as well as for the dramatic purposes of the poem. The influence of Methodism here seems symbolically significant. It was valuable in so far as it activated a process of spiritual redemption which then continued on a deeper and more personal level, outside, one senses, the potentially confining structure of a specific creed.

At the same time, there is a suggestion that Peter's superstition should be corrected by a more orthodox authority. He is moved by the reflective aura of the little chapel:

A little chapel stands alone
With greenest ivy overgrown,
And tufted with an ivy grove.

Dying insensibly away
From human thoughts and purposes,
The building seems, wall, roof, and tower,
To bow to some transforming power,
And blend with the surrounding trees.

(p. 129, l.903- 910)

However, the language in which Wordsworth expresses this spiritual influence is vaguely numinous rather than specifically religious, the chapel more reflective of natural peace and sublimity than human connectedness, and in the process of being reclaimed by nature. The symbolism of the chapel nevertheless prompts more sober and contrite thoughts in Peter:

Deep sighing as he pass'd along,
Quoth Peter, "In the shire of Fife,
"Mid such a ruin, following still
"From land to land a lawless will,
"I married my sixth wife!"

(p.129, l. 911-915)

Its aura also obliterates the more sensual, coarser influences of the pleasure-seekers in the tavern.

The poet's sympathetic receptivity to the moral and emotional impact

of the Methodist message might be read in the fact that the sounds of human distress from the Highland girl to which Peter responds are amplified and echoed in the exhortation from the open air preacher. Whether or not Wordsworth would feel that it was accessible only to the simple credulity of such as Peter, the sermon nevertheless serves to articulate the promptings of the reprobate's awakening conscience and spiritually communicate a sense of human responsibility and connectedness:

Beside the Woman Peter stands;
His heart is opening more and more

(p. 145, l. 1101-2)

[...]

And now is Peter taught to feel
That man's heart is a holy thing.

(p. 147, l. 1121-2)

Sweet tears of hope and tenderness,
And fast they fell a plenteous shower,
His nerves, his sinews seemed to melt,
Through all his iron frame was felt
A gentle and relaxing power!

(p. 139, 1011-1015)

Spiritual and human connection was a central tenet of Methodist evangelism. In its use of such terms as 'melt' to describe Bell's emotional submission, Wordsworth's description of Bell's moral awakening recalls the language of popular Methodist testimony:

The pain and sickness I have been called to pass through, I cannot describe..
But the sweet peace, the heavenly tranquillity, the holy, delightful and
heavenly joy [...] very far exceeds all description.⁷⁰

Although Wordsworth's choice of language might be thought appropriate for the simple susceptibility of the humble enthusiast, however, the narrative tone is neither critical or satirical, suggesting an imaginative immersion in the transformative process which acknowledges the healing impact of a spiritually regenerative influence. The way in which the sermon's moral theme rescues Peter from the superstitious isolation of his selfish immaturity might seem to condone the Methodist language of the heart and the emotional connection which its genuine expression establishes. Here religious enthusiasm is seriously perceived as a possible medicine, rather than as the disease it was commonly represented to be, or at least as supplying the only medicine to which the unregenerate Bell would be receptive. In its suggestion of the dissolving of boundaries of self and reason, however, the term 'melt' could also be potentially threatening and emasculating, a perception which underlay the educated hostility to religious enthusiasm.

⁷⁰ John Pawson to Joseph Entwhistle, February 23rd, 1806, 'The Life of Mr. John Pawson', *Lives*, ed. by Thomas Jackson (1872) IV, 78.

It is perhaps significant, that, in his description of Peter Bell's redemption, Wordsworth uses the familiar terminology of the New Birth with its imagery of renewal. Bell's religious conversion is symbolically expressed in natural metaphor as a spiritual and emotional rebirth:

And Nature, through a world of death
Breathes into him a second breath
More searching than the breath of spring

(p. 147, l. 1123-5)

As Richard Brantley has explored in *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism*, this Methodist language of revelation and the concept of new birth is a defining feature of Wordsworth's more personal poetic explorations of his journey toward spiritual maturity. It is nevertheless important to note that Peter Bell is not literally converted by the Methodist doctrine, but rather moved by its spirit to a new humility. Despite this initial stimulus, his moral renewal is seen as a process of independent introspection. In view of the fact that Bell lacks the education to rationally regulate his enthusiasm, it is difficult, as Jon Mee observes, to know both where the limits of his enthusiasm may lie and how far Wordsworth would approve its simple expression.⁷¹ Because the narrative framework of the poem offers a possibly critical commentary on Anglican orthodoxy, it does not follow that Wordsworth would therefore have fully endorsed a popular alternative creed. He dramatises the necessary vigour of the Methodist preacher's message in *Peter Bell* but shows Peter's moral and

⁷¹ Mee, *Romanticism*, p. 224.

spiritual maturity occurring in the period of reflection succeeding the initial excitement.

Peter Bell's transformation from 'wild rover' to integrated citizen also provides further illustration of Wordsworth's divided response to itinerancy. Although Wordsworth acknowledges the inspirational stimulus of a philosophical or poetic pedestrianism, the moral theme of *Peter Bell* asserts the need to sustain a connection with nature and humanity. Peter Bell's roving was a wandering in error under a delusion of self-sufficiency which showed selfish irresponsibility. For someone like Bell without intellectual resources, this wandering lifestyle also resulted in a loss of self which could only be restored by a more formal moral authority. In this respect, working class Methodism supplied the simple catalyst, but not necessarily a self-sufficient solution that Wordsworth would have personally endorsed.

Conclusion

Francis Jeffrey and Leigh Hunt objected partly to the conflation of the religious and poetic voice in *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*, but specifically to the evangelistic style which, for Jeffrey, consisted in an inflated mysticism, and for Hunt, in the strident rhetoric of damnation. Jeffrey's objection to the 'fantastical sublimities' and 'strained raptures' of *The Excursion*, and his description of it as 'a tissue of moral and devotional ravings' echo criticisms of the discourse of religious enthusiasm. Both critics denounced the didacticism they associated with the popular pulpit. Jeffrey could nevertheless acknowledge Wordsworth's 'knowledge of the human heart and the power he

possesses for stirring up its deepest and gentlest sympathies'.⁷² Equivocal or denunciatory critical responses to Wordsworth's experimental poetic reflected a concern about the way in which this genuine language of the heart could become debased by a vulgarly enthusiastic style and sentiment. This, in its turn, indicated an uncomfortable relationship with the social and cultural values this style and voice might seem to represent.

I have suggested that this ambivalence was shared by the author and illustrated in the contrasting style and voices of the poems. The authorial voice of *The Excursion* is simultaneously declamatory and restrained, with a perspective which incorporated the eternal and temporal, the sublime and domestic. And this was reflected in language which ranged from a concrete simplicity to mystical abstraction. It mirrored the dichotomy in the sometimes awkward marriage of the material and spiritual in popular enthusiastic discourse and the breadth of register from prosaic literality to mysticism. Such contradictory components created the disjunction associated with an uneducated style that ignored classical principles of harmony and order.

The passages in *The Excursion* of which Jeffrey approved revealed his respect for a philosophical perspective that maintained a dignified reflective detachment from the emotional and material detail of everyday experience. The morally abstract vocabulary which Jeffrey favoured similarly distanced itself from banal literalism. This philosophically reflective voice also sustained a consistency of tone and rhythm in accordance with the harmonious classical ideal. Jeffrey's praise for the knowledge of the human heart displayed in certain passages of the poem showed his respect for an emotional receptiveness

⁷² Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh*, p. 242.

which did not compromise its dignity or strain credulity by attempting to assume the voice of humble experience. For many, this attempt underlay the failure of *Peter Bell*, which, in its combination of the fantastic and banal seemed to offend both truth and dignity. For Leigh Hunt it also suggested a worrying identification with Methodism's sin-obsessed creed. Despite evidence of embarrassment, Wordsworth nevertheless remained committed to his choice of theme and hero, and may be felt to have creatively exploited the apparent incongruities of the poem to both humorous and pathetic effect in a way which dignified ordinary experience.

Criticism of Wordsworth's evangelistic tendencies challenges us to try and gauge the extent of Wordsworth's own empathy with revivalist discourse. In the visionary rhetoric of *The Excursion*, the plain, sometimes declamatory language of *Peter Bell*, in his general promotion of the language of the heart and in his preoccupation with common themes, Wordsworth could be viewed as enthusiastic in the religious sense. Although he interpreted these qualities positively, however, it was often with a self-justifying defensiveness which implied embarrassment, and he would undoubtedly have distanced himself from the cruder manifestations of popular Dissent. The poet's use of the Methodist message as an instrument of conversion for a hero he professed to like nevertheless suggests some respect for the moral and human values which underlay its doctrine. It also suggests sympathy with the concept of spiritual renewal and intuitive apprehension of spiritual truth.

Although Wordsworth might seem to endorse the concept of internal revelation, in his reference to the operation of the Spirits of the Mind, rather than any external doctrinal authority in the account of Bell's reformation, he

avoided religious orthodoxy, deliberately excising references to the 'devil', for example, in earlier versions of *Peter Bell's* redemptive journey.⁷³ Despite some nineteenth and twentieth- century critics' explicit identification of Wordsworth with specific religious denominations, the poet's affinity to any religious creed seemed to rest most in the spiritual stimulus and energy of his creative enthusiasm. It is this enthusiasm which associates him with the vigorous spirit of popular Methodism, especially in its association with open air ministry and itinerancy. In this respect, despite his educated scruples, Wordsworth could be thought to show receptivity to the energies and affections of working class enthusiasm.

⁷³ See *Peter Bell*, ed. by Jordan. Revisions on pp. 201 and 592, for example.

Chapter 7

William Hazlitt's 'gusto' and enthusiasm

One perhaps unexpected area in which the discourse on enthusiasm played an important role in literary criticism was in the writing of William Hazlitt. As with Francis Jeffrey, Hazlitt's response to Wordsworth and Coleridge seems to have been partly shaped by a series of complex assumptions about the nature of enthusiasm. Hazlitt's relationship with the two poets was to have a profound formative influence on his philosophical outlook, the direction of his career, and his critical preoccupation with emotional integrity. Yet his critical attitudes were also profoundly influenced by his background in religious Dissent which shaped his communicative style and independent spirit. Hazlitt's critical vocabulary is usually associated with the term 'gusto', but this chapter will show how this term had a complex relationship to 'enthusiasm', especially with regard to his writings on religion and his particular hostility to Methodism. Sometimes the term 'enthusiasm' enjoys a more positive role in his writing. However, the positive potentialities of the concept could also be seen to have been displaced onto the term 'gusto'. This strategy, I argue, should be understood as a semantic distinction akin to Coleridge's separation of 'enthusiasm' and 'fanaticism'. In addition to Hazlitt's writings on religion, I shall also consider how Hazlitt's stylistic analysis of poetry and prose reproduced the kinds of gendered distinctions that were essential to the century-long discourse against 'enthusiasm'. I shall look at how this gendered

frame of reference reflects his own conflicting allegiances to the intuitive, mystical fervour of a 'feminine' evangelism and the more pragmatic, muscular zeal of an intellectually authoritative Dissent.

Recent academic studies by such as John Kinnaird, Tom Paulin and Duncan Wu have acknowledged the religious dimension of Hazlitt's writing but focus on the debt which he owed specifically to the culture of Rational Dissent. These critics have failed to consider the relationship between Rational Dissent and religious enthusiasm, and the evidence of this relationship in Hazlitt's prose. Emphatic statements by Wu, for example, of Hazlitt's unequivocal contempt for Methodism seem to discount the possibility of him being influenced, albeit unconsciously, by the sentiments and discourse of the popular evangelism which Methodism represents. This chapter attempts to partly redress this current bias in Hazlitt scholarship. It will concern itself with the complex relations between enthusiasm and gusto in Hazlitt's critical vocabulary, before turning, in Chapter 8, to his specific analysis of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Hazlitt's gusto

Gusto could be seen as the key critical term Hazlitt contributed to Romantic criticism, as well as defining his own distinctive style and inimitable energy. It is not surprising that Duncan Wu, in his recently published collection of *Hazlitt's New Writings*, sometimes attributes otherwise unauthorised texts to Hazlitt partly on the basis of their use of this definitive word, often

emphatically italicised.¹ Central to the claims of this chapter is the assumption that enthusiasm and gusto occupied a similar semantic field, although Hazlitt seems anxious to distinguish between them, primarily because enthusiasm for him continued to be associated with what he considered unenlightened expressions of religion such as Methodism. Nowadays, as shown in current Thesauri, the terms *gusto* and *enthusiasm* have almost become semantically synonymous, the current *Oxford English Dictionary* associating the two words in its description of *gusto* as ‘enjoyment and *enthusiasm* in doing something’[my italics].² Samuel Johnson’s 1755 definition, with which Hazlitt would have been familiar, interpreted the word *gusto* as a denoting a sensory zest or ‘relish’; the power by which any thing excites sensations in the palate. Johnson also offers the meaning of intellectual ‘taste’, a sense that metaphorically evolved from the purely physical emphasis of its Latin origin. For Johnson, ‘*gusto*’ was innocent of the *religious* associations of his definition of ‘*enthusiasm*’.

In Hazlitt’s writings, the terms *gusto* and *enthusiasm* are generally conceptually distinct, his more positively connotated ‘*gusto*’ largely distanced from the pejorative associations of *enthusiasm*. I suggest that Hazlitt’s metaphorical gendering of discourse shaped this distinction. In its assonantal relationship to the muscular ‘robust’ and ‘gumption’, the word *gusto* exemplifies manly vigour. More broadly, it denotes the holistic engagement of sense, feeling and intellect which accords with Johnson’s dictionary definition. Yet for Hazlitt, the word was made to carry a more intense and personal resonance. *Gusto* for Hazlitt expressed the taste of a morally-based

¹ Duncan Wu, *New Writings of William Hazlitt*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

² *Collins Thesaurus of the English Language*, 2002, *OED* online, copyright 2011; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Dictionary*, 2000, rev. 2009.

discrimination founded in the ideal of connectedness which was rooted in theories of communication. Hazlitt's explicit definition of *gusto* with reference to the expressive arts, as 'the power or passion defining any object', denotes the passion invested in creative expression that invites a reciprocal response, and, in a kind of inspired *fusion* of production and reception, represents an intimate relationship of connection and engagement.³ However, Hazlitt's concurrent and alternate use of the terms in his critical writings indicates a more complex and contradictory relationship to the concepts which 'gusto' and 'enthusiasm' separately embody. Hazlitt uses the term 'gusto' to denote a mature principle of discrimination and connection while 'enthusiasm' more often suggests the extempore effusions of ignorant pretenders.⁴

An example of this distinction is Hazlitt's description of the self-styled art critics who presumptuously advertise their knowledge with:

no bounds to their burst of involuntary enthusiasm. They mount the stilts of the subject and ascend the highest Heaven of Invention, from whence they see sights and hear revelations which they communicate with all the fervour of plenary explanation to those who may be disposed to attend to their raptures.⁵

The religious terminology of 'revelation' and 'fervour' and 'raptures' which Hazlitt applies to the art critic, along with the significant collocation of '*involuntary* enthusiasm', negatively evoke the emotional inspiration of the evangelical zealot. 'The Highest Heaven of Invention' recalls the self-deluded

³ 'On Gusto', *Works*, IV, 77-80 (p. 77).

⁴ Graves, *Spiritual Quixote*, p. 279.

⁵ 'On Criticism', *Works*, VIII, 214-226 (p. 219).

fantasist exhibiting the 'heat of imagination and confidence of opinion', in Samuel Johnson's second critical dictionary definition of enthusiasm.⁶

Hazlitt's interpretation of *gusto* eluded some readers. This is apparent from such 'flippant censure' as William Gifford's detrimental comparison of Hazlitt's philosophical analysis of the arts with that of Addison. In an extended response to Gifford's attack, Hazlitt cites his derisive allusion to his effusions on 'poetry and painting, and of music and *gusto*' with the mockingly interrogative italicising of the last word. His possessively defensive retort to Gifford's flippancy: 'You cannot comprehend my definition of *gusto*, which you do not ascribe to any defect in yourself' - proclaims its subtlety and significance.⁷ As a faculty of appreciation within the context of art criticism, this *gusto* is allied to Johnson's positive definition of 'enthusiasm' as 'Elevation of fancy; exaltation of ideas'. The potential for conflation in the similar connotations of *gusto* and enthusiasm is demonstrated in Hazlitt's discussion of religious feeling. His thinking on these issues was complicated by his background of Rational Dissent. Anglican critics readily associated Dissent with enthusiasm. It is a connection implicit in Dean Jonathan Swift's satire on Dissent and enthusiasm which classifies as enthusiasts all whose conviction of personal superiority leads them to construct an independent creed and impose it on others.⁸ Within Rational Dissent there was also a complex body of material concerned with the uses of emotional pulpit rhetoric with which someone of Hazlitt's upbringing would have been familiar. It is to his background in Dissent that I shall now turn.

⁶ See Introduction, p. 11, in this thesis.

⁷ Hazlitt, 'A Letter to William Gifford', *Works*, IX, 13-59 (p. 28).

⁸ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of the Tub: To which is Added the Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* (London, 1704).

A mind shaped by the culture of Dissent

In his study of Hazlitt, *Critic of Power*, John Kinnaird discusses the Puritan paternal inheritance which shaped the younger Hazlitt's principles and independent courage.⁹ While Hazlitt's Unitarian minister father rejected the Calvinism of his Irish forebears, he revered its historical lineage of Presbyterianism. The latter was a denominational category which, in Kinnaird's view, more accurately denoted the Rev. Hazlitt's creed than the abstraction 'Unitarianism' which was rarely applied by Hazlitt to his father's faith. The son adhered to the principles of a religious heritage that was identified with liberty of mind and conscience, and which placed a high premium on learning as a route to faith.¹⁰ Hazlitt admitted being 'inclined to Puritanism [...] by education and conviction'. He expressed his belief 'in the practical efficacy', and with a significant choice of Biblical collocation, the 'saving grace of *first principles*'.¹¹ The Presbyterian tradition encouraged the spirit of rational enquiry and the emotional defence of religious principle which prompted the Rev. Hazlitt to declare in America: 'I would rather die in a ditch than submit to human authority in matters of faith.'¹² His son was to defend ideological principles with the same vehemence. The young Hazlitt's early reading included such fundamental Puritan texts as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

⁹ See Kinnaird's discussion of Hazlitt's religious inheritance in Ch. 1 in *Critic of Power*.

¹⁰ Kinnaird, *Critic of Power*, p. 12.

¹¹ 'Trifles Light as Air', *Works*, XX, 277-283 (p. 283).

¹² Margaret Hazlitt, *Recollections 1835 April 18-1838, 27th October*, ed. by Ernest J. Moyne (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1967), pp. 81-82.

Progress which, in its dedication to the internal principle of ‘heart-work’ dramatised the determined quest for truth, as well as the personal liberation and fulfilment to which the journey of Hazlitt’s own life was devoted. The Puritan characteristics of assertive independence, principled transparency and an impulse to confessional self-exposure are all exhibited in Hazlitt’s writings. As I shall illustrate with reference to the confessional *Liber Amoris*, some of these writings display a stoical puritan readiness to exhibit and embrace the pain that accompanies the growth of self-knowledge.

The circumstances of Hazlitt’s early life were shaped by his father’s commitment to the Unitarian cause which impelled a reformist venture, with his young family, to the New World in 1783. Although the Rev. Hazlitt’s reformist aims were partially fulfilled in the long term, and he achieved some initial success, he also encountered much indifference, some hostility, and ultimate frustration. However, the elder Hazlitt felt that young William, with his evident intellectual potential, might be able to complete what he had started; ‘if the boy lived up to his promise’, he declared, ‘what an addition he would make to the faith’. With a view to this end, the Rev. Hazlitt took his young son with him on his preaching circuits, setting him beside him in the pulpit to expose him to the ideas and zeal of the Dissenting mission.¹³

Hazlitt’s early exposure to pulpit rhetoric would undoubtedly have shaped his own lecturing style. Its energy and extempore, interrogative quality is likely to have influenced the confident eloquence and conversational directness of his written prose. He was later to describe the spontaneous fluency that distinguished inspired prose as ‘something akin to extempore speaking’, a

¹³ Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 43, 38.

facility which in the context of pulpit rhetoric, was regarded both with admiration and suspicion as indicative of enthusiastic delusion.¹⁴ David Bromwich sees Hazlitt's own public eloquence, as well as his morally reformist zeal, as concordant with his Dissenting background: 'a lecturer, in the early decades of the century often being a minister who had lost his complacency'.¹⁵ Wu similarly acknowledges that Hazlitt's supreme command of language connected him with the communicative imperatives of the Dissenting culture in which he had been reared.¹⁶ The knowledge Hazlitt gained of public speaking and pulpit performance would also have influenced his fascination with, and incisive analysis of, oratory and theatrical technique.

Despite Unitarianism's doctrinal denial of Christ's divine origins and humanitarian emphasis, however, Hazlitt looked in oratory for the quality of '*sacred vehemence*' (my italics) he considered essential to communicative impact. Although a speech might be intellectually coherent, it could not, he believed, be emotionally persuasive if it had no '*religion*' in it.¹⁷ 'Religion' in this sense denotes the passionate intensity and conviction of a 'divinely inspired free spirit', as Tom Paulin expresses it. Paulin appears surprised by Hazlitt's use of religious concepts and terms in this context. Despite suggesting that Hazlitt's borrowing of the phrase, '*sacred vehemence*' from Milton 'neatly side-stepped' 'the question of religious faith', he acknowledges that a sense of the religious is implicit in Hazlitt's critique of the aridly secular intellect of the philosopher and philologist Horne Tooke. Although Hazlitt can acknowledge Tooke's wit and sense, his mind and expression, in his view, lack the 'passion

¹⁴ 'On Application to Study', *Works*, XII, 55-66 (p. 62).

¹⁵ David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 6.

¹⁶ Wu, *First Modern Man*, p. 125.

¹⁷ 'The Late Mr. Horne Tooke', *Works*, XI, 47-57 (p. 47).

and enthusiasm' of greatness.¹⁸ Rationalism must be fired, Hazlitt believed, by a moral faith which would inspire the creative, dynamic fluency he had observed in his father's pulpit, and which was produced by, and achieved in its turn, the rational and emotional connectedness of gusto.

An emphasis on the manly rationalism of Presbyterian Unitarianism may have served to distinguish it from the feminine excitability of popular evangelism, yet it was the passion, rather than the rationalism which Hazlitt most celebrated in tributes to the focused zeal of his father's faith, a quality which in all religious 'sectaries' he admitted being able to understand.¹⁹ As for John Wesley earlier in the century, it was emotional conviction rather than a purely rational persuasion which he most honoured. 'The seat of knowledge, Hazlitt observed, 'is in the mind, *wisdom* in the heart', endorsing the affective emphasis of evangelism.²⁰ Hazlitt's interpretation of 'Genius', which informed his analysis of communicative style and was central to his concept of gusto, denoted the inspired wisdom of an essentially intuitive connectedness and the transformative nature of this revelation. The Presbyterian respectability of the Hazlitt family may not have been so ideologically removed from evangelical inspiration and Methodist culture as Kinnaird claims, and which successive critics have assumed.

It was the innocent idealism of this faith which Hazlitt celebrated and in which he found an echo of the youthful sentiments of trust and ardour to which he fondly returned in memory and regretted he could never fully recover. Crabb Robinson's representation of Hazlitt as 'an avowed infidel' has led

¹⁸ Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 253.

¹⁹ 'The Tendency of Sects', *Works*, IV, 47-51, (p. 50).

²⁰ *Characteristics: in the manner of Rochefoucault's Maxims*, *Works*, IX, 222.

biographers to take his atheism for granted. It seems likely, however, that the Reverend Hazlitt's visionary fervour inspired in his son a spiritual receptiveness that found expression in Hazlitt's response to poetry and to poetic sensibility more generally.²¹ Although Hazlitt indirectly assumed a stance of religious scepticism, Kinnaird remarks on the ambivalence of his persistent allegiance to the 'truth', if not the *ideas* of his father's 'creed'.²² Hazlitt was to attribute the scepticism which produced the rift between himself and his father not so much to a rejection of his faith, as disillusionment with the pedantry of theological disputation. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Wordsworth shared this aversion. Looking back at the history of his family's changing religious loyalties, Hazlitt remarked on how 'three generations' were 'made uncomfortable...by a veering point of theology and the officious meddling religious critics!'"²³

The Reverend Hazlitt had been delighted by his son's receptiveness to ideas and religious sentiment when he tutored him privately, and decided to consolidate the process by enrolling him at the Dissenting Academy of Hackney. Here however, the eager scholar was introduced to ideas which dissented from the formal precepts of Unitarianism, and indeed, according to Coleridge, encouraged atheistic tendencies. 'At Hackney', he declared, 'they learnt too many of them, Infidelity.'²⁴ In recollections of his time at the academy, Hazlitt described the heady cultural atmosphere he imbibed as one of a 'lofty enthusiasm' in which one is 'dazzled by the brightness of the waking

²¹ *Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, I, 6.

²² Kinnaird, *Critic of Power*, p. 14-15.

²³ 'On the Knowledge of Character', *Works*, VIII, 303-317 (p. 312).

²⁴ Coleridge to John Prior Estlin, Sat., March 1st [1800], *Letters*, I. 577.

dream'.²⁵ This was a youthful idealism which, in Kinnaird's words, paradoxically combined 'visionary prophecy with heedless iconoclasm'.²⁶ The religious idiom employed both by Kinnaird, and Hazlitt in his retrospective essay, evokes both the political radicalism and religious millenarianism that had fired other romantic idealists earlier in the decade. Hazlitt's phrase, 'lofty enthusiasm' conveys both ironic self-distancing and a continuing receptivity to the ardour and danger which this 'enthusiasm' enshrined.

While Hazlitt might have rejected Unitarianism's formal precepts and was quick to challenge doctrinal bigotry, he honoured believers' 'willingness to incur a certain portion of obloquy and ill will for the sake of what they believe to be the truth', respecting above all the integrity besides which precise doctrinal tenets were almost irrelevant.²⁷ Like his father, Hazlitt too would refuse to compromise his principles to further his career. In the context of political radicalism, Hazlitt's passionate, religiously inflected assertions were more reminiscent of seventeenth-century devotion to principle than Whiggish moderation. 'The disciple of the *New School*' [of radical political philosophy], he declared, 'is to be always the hero of duty [...] his feeling of what is right is to be at all times wrought up to a pitch of enthusiastic self-devotion; he must become the unshrinking martyr and confessor of the public good.'²⁸ Although the critical inflection of this statement suggests Hazlitt's wariness of this heroic impulse, it expresses the reckless instinct which characterised his own uncompromising dedication to the cause of truth, with 'the intensity of a

²⁵ 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth', *Works*, XVII, 189-99 (p 197).

²⁶ Kinnaird, *Critic of Power*, p. 23.

²⁷ *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, IV, 222.

²⁸ 'William Godwin', *Works*, XI, 16-28 (p. 19).

ministerial taking of vows'.²⁹ The phrasing of the remark hints at the conflict between Hazlitt's own constitutional tendencies to scepticism and passion. His intellectual power was animated by a passion more reminiscent of Puritan fervour than Augustan restraint, though channelled in the secular direction of radical politics.

In view of his sense of the relationship between religious and political independence, it is not perhaps surprising that Hazlitt's first publication, at the age of thirteen, was a denunciation of religious and political persecution, inspired by *The Shrewsbury Chronicle*'s attack on Unitarian scientist Joseph Priestley's 'impious and erroneous doctrines'.³⁰ Jonathan Gross describes Hazlitt as pursuing his careers as artist and journalist 'with the enthusiasm of a religious convert', which he attributes to a persistent intellectual loyalty to his father. Although as he represents it, this might sound too deliberate and conscious a process, Hazlitt, in his opinion, 'avoided the guilt of rebelling against his father's wish that he become a Unitarian minister by approaching journalism with a *religious* sensibility (my italics)'.³¹

Hazlitt was to express admiration for the combative spirit of Dissent in public debate. In a comparative analysis of the oratory of preachers Mr. Irving and Dr. Priestley, he wrote: 'We should like to have seen a tilting-bout on some point [...] between the little Presbyterian parson and the great Goliath of modern Calvinism, Mr. Irving; [Dr. Priestley] would have had his huge Caledonian boar-spear, his Patagonian club out of his hands in a twinkling with

²⁹ Kinnaird, *Critic of Power*, p. 22.

³⁰ Letter, 1791, 2-9 Nov., to the editor of the *Chronicle*, quoted in Wu, *First Modern Man*, p. 49.

³¹ Jonathan Gross, 'Hazlitt's Worshipping Practice', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 4, *Nineteenth century* (1995), 707-721 (p.717).

his sharp Unitarian foil.'³² The metaphors evoke a general mental vigour, although the image of the 'sharp Unitarian foil' honours the superior thrust and dexterity of Unitarian argument over the more bludgeoning tactics of Calvinist zeal.

Hazlitt's lectures at the Surrey Institution were addressed to a self-taught and self-improving middle class audience from a similar background of Rational Dissent, whom he would engage both with the dynamic rhetoric and missionary verve which sought the moral reformation of its audience.³³ Yet in its appeal both to reason and emotion, Hazlitt's communicative gusto was remote from what he considered the mindless rantings of the popular pulpit which bewildered rather than elucidated. Hazlitt's distinction between Priestley's foil and Irving's 'Patagonian club' figuratively dramatises the didactic crudity of sectarian rhetoric which for him, as for other intellectuals, found its most extreme expression in Methodism.

Yet with delicate receptiveness to a quite different spirit, Hazlitt honoured in gently lyric language the innocence as well as the tough conviction of those guided by such a faith as his father's. This he describes in terms that echo the cadences, poetic inversions and exalted imagery of a more pious enthusiastic style:

Happy are they, who live in the dream of their own existence, and see all things in the light of their own minds; who walk by faith and hope, not by

³² 'The Late Mr. Priestley', *Works*, XX, 236-239, (p. 238).

³³ Bromwich, *Mind of a Critic*, pp. 6-7.

knowledge; to whom the guiding-star of their youth still shines from afar,
and into whom the spirit of the world has not entered! ³⁴

This self-deceptively serene invulnerability, evoking a state of uncorrupted blessedness, is expressed in a sentimental mode which suggests affectionate respect on the writer's part. The portrait of his father is softened with the benignity of his old age, but it is perhaps an unexpected sentimentalising of a man who had taken on his enemies with the gusto of a ring fighter in the height of his ministerial career. This representation illustrates Hazlitt's capacity to balance opposing perspectives. He might have acknowledged the naivety of Hazlitt Senior's simple unworldly trust, but at the same time, understood the power of the youthful idealism which directed much of his own passionate advocacy and impatience of political apostasy. The lyrical style and pious tone which mirrored this simple but devout conviction 'hovers', as David Bromwich astutely observes, 'on the brink of an irony which is never quite formulated.'³⁵

The language may reflect the writer's ambivalent response to religious faith, an internal tension between the contrary instincts of rational scepticism and piety. The latter is suggested in the biblical metaphor and cadence in which Hazlitt elevated a simple, self-sacrificial devotion to personal principle. 'The yoke of life is to them light and supportable. The world has no hold on them. They are in it, not of it; and a dream and glory is ever about them'.³⁶ Hazlitt's reference to his father's innocent capacity for wonder: 'My father's life was comparatively a dream; but it was a dream of infinity and death, the

³⁴ 'A Reply to the Essay on Population by the Rev. T.R. Malthus, Letter V', *Works*, I, 181-284 (p. 284).

³⁵ Bromwich, *Mind of a Critic*, p. 61.

³⁶ 'Reply to Malthus', *Works*, I, 284.

resurrection, and a judgement to come!', in its empathetic exclamatories, gently implied the vulnerability of such unworldliness. In its lack of the habitual satirical inflection, however, the language also suggested the writer's own receptiveness to such influences.³⁷ Hazlitt's respect for his father's distinctively Christian virtues is suggested in the scriptural analogy of Lean's assertion that Hazlitt 'could no more have betrayed his father than 'he could have stabbed the good Samaritan in the back'.³⁸

Although he would always condemn the unimaginative narrow mindedness of sectarian zeal, Hazlitt could respect the dependability of non-conformists which could make them 'the safest partisans and steadiest friends'.³⁹ His own friends numbered the 'excitable and energetic Unitarian preacher' and literary enthusiast, Joseph Fawcett, whose acquaintance he first made in 1795, and who proved a formative influence.⁴⁰ At the same time, Hazlitt's 'tender veneration' for men 'too good for the world' such as his father, and radical Dissenter Richard Price, would always be tempered with the conviction that unworldly detachment represented some abnegation of social or political responsibility and could never exert the moral leverage necessary for civil reform.⁴¹

The rational and sensory emphasis of Hazlitt's 'gusto' served to secularise and achieve distance from a specifically religious zeal with its irrational and mystical tendencies. At the same time, Hazlitt's secularisation of enthusiasm could have been an attempt to mask a private empathy, if not with any religious creed, with its passions and loyalties. While bringing out implicit

³⁷ Bromwich, *Mind of a Critic*, p. 59.

³⁸ E. Tangye Lean, *The Napoleonists: a Study in Political Disaffection 1760-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 210, quoted in Gross, p. 708.

³⁹ 'The Tendency of Sects', *Works*, IV, 51.

⁴⁰ Wu, *First Modern Man*, p. 57.

⁴¹ Bromwich, Review of *Day-Star of Liberty* for the *London Review of Books* (1998), pp. 3-6 (p. 4).

contradictions, I shall attempt to explain how Hazlitt's respect for the sincere zeal of Rational Dissent was distinguished from the enthusiasm of popular revivalism which, in the case of Methodism, he identified with the cardinal vices of hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

Hazlitt's critique of Methodist enthusiasm

Hazlitt's 'On the Causes of Methodism' was first published in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and in 1817 collected in the *Round Table* compilation of essays.⁴² It significantly echoes and reinforces the sentiments of the editor's own denunciation of Methodism in *The Examiner* some years earlier in *The folly and dangers of Methodism*. In view of his own negative estimation of Methodism, it is not perhaps surprising that Leigh Hunt should have emphatically commended the essay's 'chivalrous eloquence'.⁴³ In a generalised and simplified view of Methodism, Hazlitt identified what he saw as its defining attitudes and mode of expression.

Hazlitt opens his essay with a playfully satirical portrait of the Hebrew King David whom he identifies as the 'first Methodist' on account of his religious enthusiasm.⁴⁴ Hebrew prophets were routinely identified with enthusiasm within the oral and verbal tradition inherited by contemporary evangelists.⁴⁵ Hazlitt goes on to describe the habit of thought and mode of expression which he felt to characterise popular Methodism. It is not flattering.

⁴² 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 57-61.

⁴³ 'A Letter to William Gifford, Esq', *Works*, IX, 11-59 (p. 18).

⁴⁴ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 57.

⁴⁵ Mee, *Romanticism*, p. 230.

He clearly believed the Methodist creed to be founded on a self-deceptive conviction of the sufficiency of grace, and indifference to its practical expression in Christian service. He emphasises the cheerful contradictions of King David's faith, presenting his attitude as one of confident complacency and self-importance:

After any trifling peccadillo in point of conduct, as a murder, adultery, perjury, or the like, he ascended with his harp into some high tower of his palace; and having chaunted, in a solemn strain of poetical inspiration, the praises of piety and virtue, made his peace with heaven and his conscience.⁴⁶

In his 1818 lecture on the genius of Shakespeare and Milton, Hazlitt attributes what he described as the lack of 'religious enthusiasm' in Shakespeare's writings to a modest lack of self-importance, and an absence of the dogmatism he negatively identified with the Methodist zealot. Hazlitt's assertion implies that Shakespeare, secure in his own genius, has nothing to protest or demonstrate.⁴⁷ Yet, despite the satirical inflation of his portrait of King David, Hazlitt seems to enjoy the theatricality of David's 'sanguine and robust' style. His mock celebration of David's 'fulness of gusto' implicitly condones his communicative charisma and positive self-belief, however misguided, while the phrase 'most royally', though satirically edged, is genially applied to David's theatrical self-projection.⁴⁸ In another essay Hazlitt acknowledges that 'some degree of affectation is as necessary to the mind as dress to the body; we

⁴⁶ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 57.

⁴⁷ 'On Shakespeare and Milton', Lecture III, *Works*, V, 44-68 (p. 56).

⁴⁸ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 57, 58.

must overact our part in some measure, in order to produce any effect at all'.⁴⁹

The persuasive power of religious enthusiasm was, for its critics, however, an unreliably seductive attribute.

Hazlitt compares King David's panache favourably with the unprepossessing appearance and manner of the humbler Methodist enthusiasts who conspicuously lack David's energetic charisma and, as he describes them, collectively resemble 'a set of scarecrows', a 'pious cavalcade' of 'melancholy tailors, consumptive hairdressers, squinting cobblers, women with child or in the ague'.⁵⁰ This abject image lacks the health and energy which for Hazlitt was a primary component of 'gusto'. It suggests that, in his view, this kind of religious enthusiasm is not founded in a rationally grounded conviction but in a sad self delusion which proceeds from bodily and mental sickness and emotional immaturity. Such unfortunates are 'religious invalids [...] the refuse of all that is weak and unsound in body and mind [...]. They are not well in the flesh, and thus take refuge in the spirit'. These metaphors of sickness echo the popular critical view of enthusiasm as a disease and disorder. Hazlitt directly opposes the unhealth of religious enthusiasm to the health of gusto, and to the 'right-down, hearty, honest, good-looking face upon the matter which he associated with the 'regular clergy'.⁵¹

Hazlitt's image of the spiritless Methodist illustrates the introverted enthusiast as distinct from the 'extraverted fanatic'. Coleridge saw these two species of enthusiast as being at opposite ends of the spectrum of enthusiastic

⁴⁹ 'On Cant and Hypocrisy', *Works*, XVII, 345-354, (p. 353).

⁵⁰ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 58

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 58, 59.

This unflattering perception prompts Duncan Wu to claim Hazlitt's authorship of a previously unattributed article which similarly emphasises the 'gusto-less' physical and mental unhealthiness of Methodists (*New Writings* 1, 368).

style. In his view, 'the sanity of the mind is between superstition and fanaticism on the one hand; and enthusiasm with indifference and a diseased slowness to action on the other'.⁵² In its melancholic introspection, the latter seemed to implicitly contradict all that enthusiasm typically exemplified, and conspicuously lacked the communicative generosity which had characterised Hazlitt's father's evangelical mission. In view of Hazlitt's satirical response to Methodist enthusiasm, however, it seems ironic that the qualities which John Wesley attributed to genuine enthusiasm: 'uncommon vigour of thought, a peculiar fervour of spirit, a vivacity and strength not to be found in common men', along with others' tributes to John Wesley's own 'muscularity of thought', could, in its emphasis on both strength of mind and feeling, equally well have applied to Hazlitt and his gusto.⁵³ However, this difference also demonstrates the distinction between the rational Methodist leadership and its popular discipleship.

The fact that Hazlitt characterised David's enthusiasm as 'gusto', however, suggests that the distinction is, as much as anything, a matter of style, though this is a style due less to the confidence of rank than to individual charisma. Hazlitt's view nevertheless indicates a discomfort with the collective allegiance of organised Methodism, which contrasts sharply with the individual assertiveness of gusto. For Hazlitt, there was something abject in any uniform subjection to a creed which seemed to discourage independent judgement and choice. In this respect, the collective working class religious enthusiasm he described was the opposite of enthusiasm in its positive sense; more a denial than assertion of energy. As with Leigh Hunt in his condemnation of

⁵² Coleridge, *Biographia*, I, 31.

⁵³ 'The Nature of Enthusiasm', *Works*, II, 49.

Wordsworth's apparent endorsement of Methodist rhetoric in *Peter Bell*, Hazlitt rejected what he saw as Methodists' negative emphasis on sinful failure, the opposite of the life-affirming energy he endorsed, and which his 'gusto' was intended to exemplify.

Hazlitt condemned Methodism for its failure to appeal to the mature intelligence and for its lack of the rational foundation of gusto. Describing the sect as the religion of 'slobbering bib and go cart', he derided what he saw as its infantilism and implicitly, its unmanly irrationality.⁵⁴ The maudlin introspection criticised by such as Hazlitt and Hunt shows a conspicuous absence of the 'Good Humor' that Earl Shaftesbury had advocated as 'the best security against enthusiasm and the best foundation of piety and true religion', denoting someone 'of so sound a judgement and clear a head to be wholly free of melancholy'.⁵⁵ In common with Francis Jeffrey, Hazlitt condemns the 'jargon and nonsense' of an inflated enthusiastic style which lacks the integrated wisdom of heart and mind he considered essential for meaningful communication. Imposing 'no tax upon the understanding', it seems to him to take refuge in 'unintelligible' mysticism which produced an equivalent vagueness of language:

A set of phrases which, without conveying any distinct idea, excite our wonder, our curiosity and desires, which let loose the imagination of the gaping multitude, and confound and baffle common-sense are the common stock-in-trade of the conventicler.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 58.

⁵⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, pp. 37, 18.

⁵⁶ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 60.

The lack of educated method evident in the imprecise obscurity of this discourse was derided by those who might otherwise have endorsed enthusiasm's affective imperatives. In what he saw as Methodism's appeal to primitive emotion, Hazlitt accused the movement of appropriating the crude rhetoric of damnation and election. His assessment echoed the educated critical consensus of Jeffrey and Leigh Hunt, but failed to acknowledge the more complex reality of the Wesleyan mission explored later by Southey in his *Life of the Methodist founder*. As with Jeffrey, however, Hazlitt's principal objection to Methodism was to what he judged the hypocritical disjunction between aims and practice. He condemned all who were 'willing to indulge in all the raptures of speculative devotion, without being tied to the dull literal performance of its duties'.⁵⁷ Although David was partly redeemed by the gusto of his assertive flamboyance, he clearly demonstrated this same self-deceptive hypocrisy. 'On the Causes of Methodism' asserted the author's unequivocal view that the Methodist movement, in its claims, language and practice betrayed the principle of truth that was an essential component of 'gusto'. For many critics of religious enthusiasm, including, as it happens, John Wesley, insincerity and self-deception were the principle vices distinguishing genuine from false enthusiasm. As such, Hazlitt's gusto would seem to represent the genuine enthusiasm of which Methodist zeal was a corruption.

Hazlitt continually applied the concepts of gusto and enthusiasm to creative expression in the literary and visual arts. In his discursive and critical essays, the terms carried gendered connotations, although there is evidence of the author's contradictory allegiance to the qualities they embody. I shall examine

⁵⁷ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 61, 59.

the aesthetic theory which Hazlitt developed in his essay, 'On Poetry in General', which formed the Introductory Lecture, in 1818, of his series on 'The English Poets' delivered at the Surrey Institution. This will be followed by a section drawing closely on 'On the Prose Style of Poets', published in *The Plain Speaker* in 1826, which will consider Hazlitt's distinction between, and conflation of the two modes. This should serve to illustrate Hazlitt's sense of 'gusto' as an aesthetic, as well as ethical principle, and reveal its complex relationship to a more religiously inflected enthusiasm.

'On Poetry in General': poetic enthusiasm and effeminacy

In his essay 'On Poetry in General', Hazlitt remarks that 'the history of poetic and religious enthusiasm is much the same'. It is an assertion which acknowledged the affinity between the inspiration of religious and poetic enthusiasm. Honouring poetry as the 'high-wrought enthusiasm of fancy and feeling', Hazlitt endorses Francis Bacon's exalted perception of poetry as having 'something divine in it because it raises the mind and hurries it into sublimity, by conforming the shows of things to the desires of the soul'.⁵⁸ This exalted view of poetry is reflected in the sublime metaphors which Hazlitt often applies to it, although the heightened sentiments and style of poetry typically invite elevated language. Hazlitt's early exposure to religion might explain his particular receptivity to this discourse, however. In a discussion of Hazlitt's religious inheritance, John Kinnaird suggests that Hazlitt's concept of creative inspiration can be read as a secular transposition of divine Grace -

⁵⁸ 'On Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 1-18 (pp. 9, 4, 3).

which, of course, is central to the revivalist message of salvation - while 'Heaven' is metaphorically reconstructed as the 'empyrean', or 'ideal worlds of the most sublime art or poetry'.⁵⁹

A view of the history of poetic and religious enthusiasm as being much the same could nevertheless be seen to acknowledge both the strengths and weaknesses of their emotively spiritual stimulus. In its more conventional application in Hazlitt's writings, 'enthusiasm' often carries connotations of excess or indiscipline. When applied in his positive appraisals of poetic energy and imagination, however, the term often carries the more positive connotations of 'gusto', blurring semantic or evaluative distinctions and suggesting the writer's ambivalent perception of the poetic mode as well as his contradictory interpretation of gusto and enthusiasm. 'On Poetry in General' credits poetic enthusiasm with the vitalising energy which Hazlitt generally attributed to gusto. He celebrates its capacity to put 'a spirit of life and motion into the universe' as an expression of 'the flowing, not the fixed'.⁶⁰ Here 'flowing' denotes not effete diffusiveness, but the spontaneous, organic fluency of the inspired imagination. This kind of spontaneity also lacks the often negative, evangelical connotations of the synonymous 'involuntary'. In this essay, the term 'enthusiasm' is positively applied to the 'kindling' of creative inspiration, where it is associated with religion as a movement of the heart that is spiritually inspired. This spiritual inspiration is respected insofar as it denotes passionate conviction, as in the 'religious devotion' of monks and

⁵⁹ Kinnaid, *Critic of Power*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ 'Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 3.

anchorites which in his 'The Tendency of Sects', Hazlitt claims 'we can understand'.⁶¹

For Hazlitt, the visionary inspiration of genuine poetic enthusiasm elevates the heart and mind without detaching them from familiar human experience; instead, it brings them 'home to the bosoms and businesses of men' through 'the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself'. The statement seems to honour a specifically poetic inspiration but pays tribute to the emotional truth of a creative enthusiasm which reconnects us with our humanity. For Hazlitt, poetry was both the experience and its communication - the expression of all that was most intense, meaningful and human: 'All that is worth remembering in life is the poetry of it', he declared: 'Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry'. He echoes Wordsworth's view that a capacity to be inspired by natural beauty demonstrates emotional connection with the elemental components of human life, and that poetry, in its ability to achieve this connection, is a vehicle for self-realisation and self-revelation. Like Wordsworth, Hazlitt, in this essay, credits poetry with an almost sublime redemptive power, describing it as 'that fine particle within us that expands, rarifies, refines, raises our whole being'.⁶² In contrast, perhaps with the religious concept of revelation, however, poetic inspiration enables us to realise rather than transcend the deeper resources of our humanity, making us more truly human than divine, while at the same time, according these human qualities a near divine significance.

The sensory metaphors which Hazlitt employs in 'Poetry in General' to describe this quality nevertheless recall some of the criticisms of religious

⁶¹ 'Tendency of Sects', *Works*, IV, 50, 51.

⁶² 'Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 1, 2.

enthusiasm in its capacity to override boundaries as it pursues its own momentum: like poetry, 'impatient of all limit'.⁶³ This liberating energy has a creative, but potentially subversive independence, 'impatient' implying restless challenge. 'Flowing' recalls the water metaphors applied to undisciplined verbal fluency. Hazlitt's image for poetry's connective and expansive impulse: 'as flame bends to flame', besides the benign impression of flexible mobility, could also suggest the inflammatory capacity of unrestrained enthusiasm. Essentially, however, the combination of 'flowing' and 'flame' suggests the circulatory, transmissive energy of the vital spirits. The analogies are both sensory and spiritual, the image of flame evoking the heat and light of animate life and the spiritual insight/illumination of the imaginative faculty. The religious language of Hazlitt's definitions emphasises the spiritual authority of this poetic inspiration which 'raised the mind and hurried it into sublimity'. With 'hurried' evoking the pressure and momentum of enthusiastic energy, the statement expresses the capacity of genuine enthusiasm to transfigure familiar emotion through the visionary alchemy of the imagination.⁶⁴

Surprisingly perhaps, Hazlitt also applies the term 'enthusiasm' to the rationalist philosopher William Godwin's prose method, in which 'his own thoughts, link by link, blow by blow, with glowing enthusiasm' resembled a 'genuine ore melted in the furnace of fervid feeling'.⁶⁵ This, however, is an enthusiasm which consists in the heated intensity of mental concentration and control. This image of the forcing house of thought contrasts with the naturally volatile metaphors applied to the poetic inspiration of Shakespeare which 'flashes from him like the lightning from the summer cloud, or the stroke from

⁶³ 'Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁵ 'William Godwin', *Works*, XI, 16-28 (p. 25).

the sun flower'.⁶⁶ While Godwin's 'enthusiasm' was more expressive of the rational force and precision of gusto, Hazlitt's romanticised image of Shakespearean genius suggests a celestial gift which, in its almost unconscious spontaneity is more akin to the mystically inspirational dimension of religious enthusiasm, with the electric charge of gusto. Elsewhere, Hazlitt uses the word 'enthusiasm' to denote the spontaneous energy of poetry which the more cerebral rigours of prose could 'dampen', cutting off 'the resources of the poet'.⁶⁷ Hazlitt's description of poetic composition as 'an *involuntary* movement of imagination and passion', and the figurative concept of giving birth, also recalls the language of revivalism in its accounts of the movements of the Holy Spirit and the birth of a new vision which was often associated with the newly confident fluency of oral testimony.⁶⁸

The way in which Hazlitt related inspired poetic expression to harmony of sound revealed aesthetic criteria which associated the positive enthusiasm of genuine inspiration with an elegant fluency remote from the vulgar hyperbole of popular enthusiastic style. In common with Francis Jeffrey, he saw harmonious expression as persuasive in its musical fluency but also as the natural reflection of a more essential integration of heart, mind and sense. It was an order and balance which both felt to be lacking in the irregular dissonances of common enthusiastic discourse, but whereas Jeffrey saw this harmony as achieved through ordered restraint, for Hazlitt, it was the spontaneously harmonious eloquence to which genuine feeling naturally gave rise. And for him, timbre and intonation were crucial components of that

⁶⁶ 'Whether Genius is conscious of its Powers', *Works*, XII, 117-127 (p.118).

⁶⁷ 'The Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 5-17 (p. 8).

⁶⁸ 'Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 1.

persuasive eloquence: 'As often as articulation passes naturally into intonation, there poetry begins'. In his reference to the 'blending of syllables and lines', Hazlitt acknowledges the necessary fusion of feeling and language, of heart and voice, mind and body in the communicative process.⁶⁹

The orality of poetry, with its appeal to the senses, was for Hazlitt a crucial component of its persuasive power. The harmonious rhythms of persuasive poetry could be seen to reflect the deeper internal rhythms of an alert, connected mind and the tuned energies of the body which for Hazlitt was the epitome of the health that the Methodist enthusiast conspicuously lacked. This may seem to represent a distinction between popular religious, and poetic enthusiasm, though the language which Hazlitt applies to the latter often resembles the sublime idiom of the former, suggesting a persistent, perhaps unconscious association of the two modes. In Hazlitt's view, the rhetorical cadence of poetry distinguished all language inspired by sincere feeling and could persuade through the fluency of its conviction: 'Everyone who declaims warmly, or grows intent upon a subject, rises into a sort of blank verse, or measured prose', 'rise' emphasising how elevated feeling compelled an elevated diction.⁷⁰

The language in which Hazlitt expresses the creative method and imagination of the poet is feminine in its amorous lyricism: 'He gathers roses, he steals colours from the rainbow. He lives on nectar and ambrosia.' Citing Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hazlitt represents the poet as one who 'treads the primrose path of dalliance'. Although 'nectar and ambrosia' evoke the tastes of Olympian deities, the terms suggest frivolous fancy rather than imaginative

⁶⁹ 'Poetry in General', *Works*, V, 12.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

depth, 'dalliance' implying flirtatious performance rather than sincere engagement, while 'steals colours from the rainbow' suggested a lazy borrowing of clichéd imagery and second-hand experience. He 'ascends the highest heaven of invention, or falls flat to the ground', again accords poetic inventiveness an exalted visionary character but, as in criticisms of popular enthusiasm, implies both unstable disconnection and presumption in its propensity to absurd extremes. This sentimental language contrasts sharply with the vigorous analogy of the prose stylist 'collecting his strength to strike fire from the flint by the sharpness of collision, by the eagerness of his blows', an image denoting the sharpened light and heat of an inspiration combining reason and emotion.⁷¹ This is the spark of friction, abrasive, spirited and combative. For Hazlitt, a self-indulgent submission to sensation and fancy involves a loss of self and dissolution of restraining boundaries very different from the assertive independence of gusto, yet identified with the sensuous raptures of Methodist revivalism.

While Hazlitt employed an elevated language of the sublime in his tributes to the highest poetry, he was critical of what he considered the popular, effeminate tendencies of the genre toward a self-indulgent immersion in sensuous beauty. In the context of poetry criticism, effeminacy is 'a fastidious appetite for enjoyment', and the 'unthinking present gratification' of a narrow, narcissistic perspective.⁷² 'Fastidious' here denotes a 'nice' or precious discrimination of false, effete refinement which lacks active, responsible engagement with life's sometimes uncomfortable realities, inviting the disconnection from human truth of which the religious enthusiast was also

⁷¹ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 10.

⁷² 'On Effeminacy', *Works*, VIII, 248-255 (p. 249).

accused. Hazlitt implicitly distinguishes between this lazy, adolescent romanticism and the alert sensory engagement of gusto's muscular energy. Gusto had the mental vigour and focus absent from the effeminate extremes of sensuous luxury or mysticism, with their vagueness of thought and sensation. This combination of the sublime and the erotic characterised the discourse of religious enthusiasm. The paradox in a feminine classification of both the visionary and the sensual illustrated Hazlitt's problematic perception of the feminine and the enthusiastic discourse with which these contradictory qualities were associated.

A luxurious lyricism contrasts sharply with Hazlitt's ideal of communicative prose which in his view, is distinguished by mature restraint: 'What he adds of ornament, what he borrows from the pencil, must be sparing and judiciously inserted'.⁷³ This is the process of rational control and discrimination which the effective prose writer exercises. By contrast, the poet is too often tempted to be digressive and descriptively verbose. Hazlitt also criticises the unstable restlessness expressed in a poet's 'craving after continual excitement' which lacks the grounded steadiness and health of gusto. Wordsworth had similarly identified and condemned this kind of literary hedonism in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Hazlitt saw an effeminate weakness in style which lacked intellectual rigour and candour. Candour was a quality he would praise in writing of which he was otherwise critical, celebrating it as an attribute which distinguished sincere enthusiasm from empty posturing.⁷⁴ In the religious context of this discussion, however, it is

⁷³ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 9.

⁷⁴ In his essay, 'Sir Walter Scott', for example, Hazlitt admits that 'the candour of Sir. Walter's historic pen levels our bristling prejudices', *Works*, XI, 57-68 (p. 65).

interesting that according to Paulin, 'candour' also denotes the Unitarian principle of fairness, impartiality and justice, the qualities which Hazlitt had always admired in his father.⁷⁵ Hazlitt's respect for this quality reminds us that his estimation of enthusiastic style, whether religious or secular, depended on its attributes of sincerity and humanity.

Prose gusto

A key component of 'gusto' was muscular energy, and it was this which distinguished the prose style of those writers whom Hazlitt most admired. As such it was identified more with the masculine than the feminine principle that the visionary and sensory components of poetry were seen to represent. Gusto in prose style was found where a writer's passionate engagement with a subject released the inner rhythms of the mind, resulting in a fluent synthesis of heart and mind. The powerful pressure of thought achieved a momentum which drove and sustained both ideas and language, representing an energy which liberated the mind from anxiety and the inhibiting pressure of convention. An ideal style, for Hazlitt, combined the elements of heat and light polarised by Coleridge in his identification of Socinianism with the 'Light' of reason, and Methodism with the 'Stove' of emotional heat.⁷⁶ Hazlitt's ideal prose style was that which combined 'the tenderness of the heart with a 'firm' 'head' as exemplified, in his view, by the sensitive command of thought and sentiment in the writing of seventeenth century Anglican Divine, Jeremy Taylor, whom in

⁷⁵ Paulin, *Day-Star*, p. 254.

⁷⁶ Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 9 vols (London: Routledge, 2002: 1st edn., 1957), I, 456, no. 467.

his *Lecture on the Age of Elizabeth* he also praises in lyric terms for the 'modesty and beauty' of his 'pious page', and for his characteristic of 'enthusiastic and delightful amplification'.⁷⁷ This 'enthusiastic' expansiveness was also a distinguishing characteristic of Hazlitt's own prose. The praise showed his receptivity to passion whenever directed by intelligence. Above all, he valued the lucidity that accompanied truth of feeling. In common, ironically, with John Wesley, he admired the stylistic attributes of 'simplicity', 'strength', and 'perspicuity' which denoted this quality of mind and ensured communicability.⁷⁸

However, in his essay 'On Reason and Imagination', Hazlitt defends the passionate conviction of enthusiastic rhetoric, declaring that: 'It is easy to raise an outcry against violent invectives, to talk loud against extravagance and enthusiasm, to pick a quarrel with everything but the most calm, candid, and qualified statement of facts: but there are enormities to which word can do no adequate justice.'⁷⁹ Impassioned language was entirely appropriate and necessary, he felt, for political and social outrages such as slavery. Hazlitt defended all who demonstrated the courage of their moral convictions in a willingness to risk derision and protest. He recommended a full blooded combative style for issues of human justice where every word is forcefully delivered. Too measured and controlled a prose style might indicate a disengagement from the issue and more concern with effect than with feeling. The emotional and intellectual fusion of gusto invariably stimulated the necessary fluency.

⁷⁷ Lecture VII, 'Character of Lord Bacon's Works – compared as to style with Sir. Thomas Brown and Jeremy Taylor', *Works*, VI, 326-345 (p. 341).

⁷⁸ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 17.

⁷⁹ 'On Reason and Imagination', *Works*, XXII, 44-55 (p. 46).

It was the 'rhythms of ordinary speech' which Hazlitt judged the essence of genuine, and hence persuasive prose. Hazlitt celebrated this apparent spontaneity in his assertion that 'no style is worth a farthing that is not calculated to be read out, or that is not allied to spirited conversation'.⁸⁰ The crucial component here seems to be the conversational character of prose, which, through its expansive energy, achieves the reciprocal engagement of positive enthusiasm. This involves the sensory self-connectedness of 'familiarising oneself to the sound of one's own voice' and realising this dynamically in prose which observes the 'lively transitions of speech'. This natural, perhaps irregular vitality was a quality he felt lacking in the 'equable uniformity' of Addison's prose style and in the monotonous rhythm of Samuel Johnson's antithetical sentences and 'cumbrous cargo of words'.⁸¹ It involves an aural sensitivity to rhythm which is a component of the natural conversational style for which Wordsworth aimed but which Hazlitt believed he failed to achieve through his lack of a genuinely alert engagement with the authentic voice of rustic experience.

Hazlitt's sense of the need for prose to display the communicative naturalness and fluency of spoken language was doubtless influenced by his inheritance in Rational Dissent. Dissenting style displays an 'infinitely flexible vernacular expressiveness', in the view of Tom Paulin, although conversational intimacy and directness was equally characteristic of verbal evangelism.⁸² Certainly the aural and sensory components of spoken rhetoric, and its active engagement with an audience are evident in Hazlitt's own alert, energetic prose style. As Wu observes, the quality of spontaneous speech is visually replicated

⁸⁰ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸² Paulin, *Day-Star*, p. 151.

in his punctuation with its prolific use of the dash which communicates the pressure of excited thought and creative energy.⁸³ David Bromwich observes in Hazlitt's prose style the irresistible momentum sustained by a union of thought and feeling: 'The unforgettable phrases rush towards sentences, the sentence towards paragraphs that only stop when a feeling has run its course'. As Hazlitt himself asserted: 'Why should one not make a sentence of a page long, out of the feelings of one's whole life?'⁸⁴ For sceptical commentators on evangelical discourse this same organic spontaneity was a problematic element of the extempore style and method of the Methodist pulpit, particularly where emotional expression seemed disconnected from the control of the rational intellect and attributed to supernatural inspiration.⁸⁵

Hazlitt admired the conversational ease and naturalness of Robert Southey's prose style as well as the unaffected precision of his 'straightforward, intelligible, practical, pointed' method that combined 'antique quaintness' with a 'modern familiarity'.⁸⁶ He respected the honesty it seemed to reflect as well as the modest stylistic restraint of someone who was evidently not 'buoyed up by conscious power' in a way felt to typify the deluded enthusiast. Expressing the martial qualities implicit in 'gusto', Hazlitt commends the decisive precision of the way in which Southey 'doesn't waste powder and shot in the air, but loads his piece, takes a level aim, and hits his mark'. The fight imagery employed by Hazlitt - and by Coleridge for Hazlitt's own method, made explicit the combative precision of a prose style in which every word is 'a blow', and echoed the resolute spirit of Dissent in Hazlitt

⁸³ Wu, *New Writings*, p. 394.

⁸⁴ Bromwich, Review of *Day-Star*, p. 3.

⁸⁵ John Green, Bishop of Lincoln, for example, discusses this aspect of Methodist enthusiasm at length in *The Principles and Practices of Methodism* (London, 1760).

⁸⁶ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 16.

senior's energetic ministry.⁸⁷ Such imagery as Hazlitt's remark that 'sterling prose throws aside all such idle respect to appearances, and with its pen, like a sword 'sharp and sweet', lays open the naked truth', also implicitly celebrates a sexually confident masculine principle of assertion and conquest opposed to the 'feminine' enthusiasm of sensuous submission.

Hazlitt was receptive to qualities of manliness even in work of which he is otherwise critical, as in the ruggedness of Sir Walter Scott's historical narratives which displayed the gusto otherwise lacking in the 'present artificial, civilised state of society', with its 'effeminate clinging to life'.⁸⁸ This was a passive and genteel sensibility remote from the hardy resolution of Scott's manly heroics. Rejecting what he saw as weakness or cowardice, Hazlitt praised a 'manly firmness and decision of character, a person who knows his own mind and sticks to it'. Effeminacy was identified with the immaturity implicit in his suggestion that Keats' imaginative gifts had the 'fresh fertility of spring, but lacked the fierceness of autumn, or the richness of autumn, and winter he seemed not to have known until he felt the icy hand of death!'⁸⁹

One should not be tempted to oversimplify Hazlitt's distinction between the feminine attributes of poetic enthusiasm and the masculine characteristics of prose gusto, however. Hazlitt's implicitly feminine classification of poetry applies to poetic sensibility more generally than to the work of individual poets. Although the visionary language which Hazlitt often applied to poetry acknowledged its spiritual genesis, he was equally receptive to the qualities of

⁸⁷ Coleridge to Thomas Wedgwood, Fri., Sept. 16th, 1803, *Letters*, I, p. 991. Coleridge refers to Hazlitt's words 'flying direct to their mark with a twang of the Bow-string'.

⁸⁸ 'On the Fear of Death', *Works*, VIII, 321-330 (p. 328).

⁸⁹ 'On Effeminacy', *Works*, VIII, 255.

gusto evident in the sensuous appeal of such poetry as that of Burns, who 'exerts all the vigour of his mind, all the happiness of his nature, in exalting the pleasures of wine, of love, and good fellowship'. Such qualities demonstrated Burns' connection with the physical energies and sensory stimulants of human life which he felt to be lacking in Wordsworth's more austere reclusiveness. Hazlitt also praised the gusto in Burns' ability to sustain the positive energy of his verse, ensuring that his vision remains 'fresh and gay'.⁹⁰ In the continual reaffirmation and renewal implied in 'fresh', this gusto has a physically, as well as mentally redemptive, power. It is in telling contrast with the melancholy introspection which Hazlitt castigated in his satirical portrait of the Methodist enthusiast. As such, it directly challenges the rejection of physical life implicit in the religious visionary's 'enthusiastic' transcendence of the sensory and temporal.

'Liber Amoris' and the erotic sublime

If Methodist enthusiasm was identified with a loss of rational control, emotional and sensuous abandonment and self delusion, this was the enthusiasm that Hazlitt expressed and from which he suffered in *Liber Amoris*, the intimate testimony of his infatuation with his landlady's daughter, Sarah Walker, when a lodger in Southampton Buildings in 1820.⁹¹ The language and tone of Hazlitt's record of this infatuation is described by Gerald Lahey as

⁹⁰ Hazlitt, Lecture VII, 'On Burns and the Old English Ballads', *Works*, V, 123-143 (p.131).

⁹¹ *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt [Liber Amoris and the Spirit of the Age]*, VII, ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998).

presenting 'an incandescent blaze of confessional fervour'.⁹² Lahey's choice of language is more evocative of the intensity of religious testimony than the self-possessed intellectual argument of the Hazlittian essay, and presents a contrasting image of the inflammatory radical of popular reputation. It is significant, however, that despite the dismay of his friends, Hazlitt, impelled by his driving impulse to honesty, did not regret the publication of this painful affair. In a letter to Peter George Patmore, he described the collected conversations of *Liber Amoris* as 'very nice reading', which suggests that it functioned as a welcome catharsis.⁹³

In view of his gendered critique of written expression, it is interesting to note how, in this painfully personal record, Hazlitt abandoned the self-possessed gusto of his muscular prose for the effusive, 'effeminate' language of sensibility:

What idle sounds the common phrases, *adorable, creature, angel, divinity* are! What a proud reflection it is to have a feeling answering to all these rooted in the breast, unalterable, unutterable, /to which all other feelings are light and vain!

Should I ever behold her again? Where go to live and die far from her? In her sight was Elysium; her smile was heaven; her voice was enchanting; the air of

⁹² 'Introduction', *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Herschel Moreland Sikes, assisted by William Hallam Bonner and Gerald Lahey (New York: New York University, 1978), p. 9.

⁹³ Hazlitt to Peter Patmore, 30th March, 1822, *Letters of William Hazlitt*, p. 249.

love waved around her, breathing balm into my heart: for a little while I had sat with the Gods at their golden tables, I had tasted of all earth's bliss.⁹⁴

Illustrating the capacity for 'worship' identified by Jonathan Gross, Hazlitt constructed from his landlady's flirtatious daughter a visionary ideal which recalled the mysticism of the religious zealot, employing a similarly devotional language in sublime metaphor. A similar submission to the spiritual ecstasy of desire was often derided as a typically feminine response to evangelical exhortation. Hazlitt's amatory discourse also resembled the nuptial and sensuous language often employed by the Methodist evangelist and lampooned in female conversion testimonies. Gross describes Hazlitt's 'religious feelings' which were once 'rational and Unitarian' as having become 'degraded' by 1820 at the time of this infatuation with Sarah Walker. This interprets the affair as respectable masculine rationalism lapsing into sentimental enthusiasm.⁹⁵

The Dissenting principle of probity, allied with a Puritan impulse to self-abasement may have impelled the confessional exposure of Hazlitt's thwarted passion. His apparent indifference to reputation also recalls the martyr's reckless indifference to the world's opinion. For his friends, the confessional intimacy of the text was a source of embarrassment, the subjection of reason to sensory infatuation unmanly and demeaning. The personal exposure of *Liber Amoris* supplied a rich opportunity for further vilification from Hazlitt's enemies in the field of political journalism. Loyal friends like Charles Lamb felt it necessary to defend Hazlitt's reputation by asserting the intelligence which may have been, he implies, temporarily clouded by his infatuation. 'I

⁹⁴ *Liber Amoris*, pp. 44, 31.

⁹⁵ Gross, 'Hazlitt's Worshipping Practice', p. 717.

should belie my own conscience', he wrote in response to a letter written by Southey to the *Quarterly* 'if I said less, than that I think W.H. to be, in his natural and healthy state, one of the wisest and finest spirits breathing'.⁹⁶

The extremity of Hazlitt's feelings seemed to exhibit a loss of the rationally balanced self-containment he had always associated with healthy sanity. Certainly the terms his friends applied to Hazlitt's state of mind suggested the delusion of madness or the delirium of fever. The loss of self inherent in possession was dramatically expressed in his remark: '*hysterico passio* comes upon me and threatens to unhinge my reason.'⁹⁷ The painter Haydon testified to Hazlitt's distracted state:

Hazlitt's torture is beyond expression; you may imagine it. The girl really excited in him devoted and intense love. His imagination clothed her with that virtue which her affected modesty induced him to believe in, and he is really downright in love with an ideal perfection, which has no existence but in his own head! He talks of nothing else day and night.⁹⁸

Despite the general derision, however, some contemporary reviews respected the essentially emotional inspiration of the book and praised the courage of its confessional honesty while recognizing the lack of restraint and decorum which this honesty involved: 'It is a strange story and most courageously told.

The locality wants something of dignity, but what has dignity to do with love?'

⁹⁶ Charles Lamb, *London Magazine* 8 (Oct. 1823), p. 405. In 'The Progress of Infidelity', Southey qualified his praise for Lamb by criticising his choice of such companions as Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt.

⁹⁷ *Liber Amoris*, p 40.

⁹⁸ Benjamin Robert Haydon to Mary Russell Mitford, 8th Sept., 1822, *The Life, Letters and Table Talk of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Richard Henry Stoddard (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), p. 211.

Although a lack of dignity was frequently deplored in enthusiastic discourse, in the view of this reviewer this deficiency was subordinate to the genuine feeling that had inspired it and through which it was felt to have achieved an inclusive communicativeness. '*Liber Amoris* is unique in the English language' the reviewer remarked; 'and, possibly, the first book in its fervour, its vehemency and its sensations which the common race of mankind seek most studiously to mystify or conceal'.⁹⁹ Mary Russell Mitford, consistent contemporary admirer of Hazlitt, was equally receptive to the courage of its emotional honesty, describing the feelings expressed as 'a fine passion, and therefore affecting'.¹⁰⁰

Embarrassment has nevertheless persisted with the incipient vulgarity of *Liber Amoris*'s inflated style. It was demonstrated in Howe's evasive and cryptic handling of Hazlitt's infatuation in his 1922 biography. There have been attempts by recent scholars to rationally justify the text's sentimental discourse by interpreting it as an ironically objective exercise. Stanley Jones, for example, represents the text as 'the dialogue of the lover and his coy mistress, couched on his side in language that dramatises the familiar romantic dichotomy between the emotional and intellectual'.¹⁰¹ Tom Paulin sees in *Liber Amoris*'s emotional self-exposure the betrayal of a fine intelligence. In terms that recall the self-laceration of the religious penitent he describes the text as exhibiting 'a nihilistic, self-flagellating desperation'. His description of the style as 'stilted and full of recycled clichés' also questions its honesty, an assumption disputed by David Bromwich who acknowledges in his review of Paulin's *Day-Star* that 'One may not know what to say about it and still one

⁹⁹ Review in *The Globe*, 7th June, 1823, p. 338, quoted in Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt; A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Mary Russell Mitford, *Letters*, 2nd Series, ed. by H. Chorley (London, 1872), 1, 126.

¹⁰¹ Stanley Jones, *A Life from Winterslow to Friith Street* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), quoted in Gross, p. 707.

may find it unbearably true.’¹⁰² Hostile readings betray an intellectual discomfort with its emotive and erotic ‘enthusiasm’, implicitly judging it immature and unmanly. This embarrassment may be too ready to deny significant aspects of the rationally masculine Hazlitt’s character: a religious impulse to worship, and emotional receptiveness to the refinement and erotic power of the feminine.

The alternative title under which *Liber Amoris* was published, *The New Pygmalion*, alluded to the Ovidian myth which relates the sculptor Pygmalion’s infatuation with a statue that is miraculously animated by Venus. This title metaphorically illustrated the artistic process by which Hazlitt constructed an image from an imperfect human subject and invested it with idealised attributes. *Liber Amoris*’s confessional Romanticism therefore objectified and poeticised the writer’s emotions through classical metaphor, the visual framing of his artistic imagination and creative manipulation of language. It was a process which combined the passionate engagement and artistic objectivity evident to a less extreme extent in Hazlitt’s general communicative method and style. As such, the confession, though passionately driven, demonstrated some of the educated control that elitist judgement felt to be absent from humble enthusiastic discourse. At the same time, the heightened language and emotion was judged by many to demonstrate the self-deceptive retreat from reality for which the enthusiastic religious visionary was also criticised.

¹⁰² Paulin, *Day-Star*, p. 45; Bromwich, *Review of Day-Star*, p. 6.

Conclusion

In Hazlitt's discursive writings, 'enthusiasm' and 'gusto' were distinguished on the basis of their relationship with truth, traditional religious enthusiasm being identified with the self-deceit which deceives and bewilders in its turn, gusto with the integrity which inspires conviction and can therefore be an agent of revelation. Hazlitt could nevertheless apply the term 'enthusiasm' positively, even to religion, to denote a sincere, if misguided commitment, as in his own father's devoted ministry. For Hazlitt, the quality, or sincerity of any enthusiasm was measured by its communicability, and this was dependent on an enthusiast's genuine connection with the subject, the audience, and an honest relationship with oneself.

I have considered how the gusto of prose expression, in Hazlitt's analysis, reflected the characteristics of his father's Rational Dissent, and how the poetic sensibility was represented in both the visionary and sensory terms identified with the feminine discourse of evangelism. My gendered analysis of Hazlitt's gusto has exposed the contradictions in his advocacy of manly rationalism and simultaneous empathy with the heightened sensibilities of the more 'feminine' enthusiasm associated with evangelistic and poetic inspiration.

The sensory component of Hazlitt's gusto was an important element of connectedness, but this was an alert sensory engagement carefully distinguished from sensuous indulgence. The latter, in its self-enclosure, lacked the expansive energy which would engage the respondent in a reciprocal exchange. The qualities of lassitude, passivity, and a static self-reflectiveness attributed to the sin-obsessed religious zealot - and to the narcissistic poet -

were also identified with the melancholy 'enthusiasm' of the Methodist disciple. In contrast with this diseased enthusiasm of mental and emotional imbalance, Hazlitt's gusto represented the balanced integration of mind, sense and spirit as well as the reciprocal stability of communicative exchange. This sense of gusto's communicative imperative underlay Hazlitt's criticism of the self-serving posturing which he associated with popular Methodism and satirised in the figure of the scriptural David.

Hazlitt's advocacy of gusto may have enabled him to distance himself from the feminine connotations of religious enthusiasm and by association from plebeian culture. We have already noted the way in which popular Methodism liberated the female voice by licensing emotional expression and introspection. This association of popular religious enthusiasm with women is likely to underlie much male disparagement of its discourse, and explain Hazlitt's attempt to distinguish between a muscular affirmative gusto and a more indulgent, effeminate enthusiasm. Hazlitt's own occasional 'lapses' into more sentimental discourse nevertheless communicate the emotional enthusiasm he elsewhere disparaged, as in the affectionate expression of his father's unworldly innocence and the metaphorical fusion of sensuous and sublime which idealised the feminine graces of Sarah Walker. Despite what some saw as the feminine inspiration of a religiously inflected enthusiasm, the persistent emphasis on its rational origins demonstrated the concern of its educated advocates to legitimise its insights and values through appeal to the masculine tribunal of reason.

Hazlitt condemned a languid, sensuous style for the reciprocal indolence it encouraged in the reader, judging it irresponsible for failing to change the way

the reader thought or felt. The capacity to challenge and even to disturb was for him a crucial attribute of effective writing. Prose, in his view, more often exhibited this quality, though his essays on poetry paid equivalent tribute to the capacity of poetry to inspire. Yet the varied metaphors which Hazlitt applied to poetry revealed a more ambivalent attitude towards the enthusiasm which poetry represented and the feminine attributes it enshrined. On the one hand, Hazlitt condemned the indulgent lushness and passive languor of the lyric style, on the other, celebrated in religious metaphor the visionary inspiration of poetry which, in the context of popular evangelism, might be perceived as a feminine mysticism. Poetic and religious inspiration was clearly felt to share an intuitively visionary wisdom and implicitly honour a Platonic faith in ideal generalities beyond and behind the temporal and material.

It is a truth that air, water, fire and earth are all required in equal measure in a healthy constitution, and a lightning charge is generated through a collision of air and heat. In case we are tempted, through Hazlitt's use of these elemental metaphors, into too simplistic an assessment of his gendered polarisation of enthusiasm, it is important to remember that he was as willing to apply the quality of gusto as a creative principle to women as to men. Hazlitt's receptivity to feminine gusto is shown in his positive appraisal of the performances of actress Fanny Kemble, amongst other female artists, whose restrained and truthful rendering of such characters as Shakespeare's Juliet, demonstrated that she had the taste to reject 'the meretricious display, the vulgar arts, the loud declamation and over-wrought finesse of the practised actress', or false enthusiast.¹⁰³ By comparison with enthusiasm in its pejorative

¹⁰³ Hazlitt, [Review] 'Covent Garden', Wu, *New Writings*, II, 302-305 (p.304).

religious sense, Hazlitt's gusto, as applied to the communicative arts, might be seen to represent the fundamental distinction between truth and falsity, self-knowledge and self-deception. Like a moral musician, he was ever sensitive to the false note in argument or expression, although he may not always have been equally alert to his own capacity for contradiction.

In the next chapter, I shall develop further gusto's sense of connectedness and consider how Hazlitt applied the concept as a moral and aesthetic principle in his critical appraisal of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Chapter 8

Inspiration and disillusion: Hazlitt's changing estimation of Wordsworth and Coleridge

In this chapter I outline Hazlitt's personal and critical relationship with Wordsworth and Coleridge and consider how far his changing estimation of the poets reflected his sense of their emotional and intellectual honesty - how far, therefore, his judgement was rooted in a perception of their 'gusto', or connectedness. Hazlitt's essential respect for Wordsworth and Coleridge's creative gifts was modified by a critical alertness to evidence of affectation or sentimentality. This he believed to be increasingly apparent in their writings and saw reflected in an increasing tendency toward the narcissistic, self-deceptive enthusiasm identified negatively with the discourse of popular evangelism. I shall look at the language in which Hazlitt expresses his own enthusiasms and judges others', and consider what it suggests of his uncertain distinction between gusto and religious enthusiasm and his ambivalent relationship with the latter.

Hazlitt's assessment of Wordsworth and Coleridge's artistic integrity will be illustrated with reference to his extended reviews of Wordsworth's 1814 *Excursion*. I shall also discuss his responses to Coleridge's early pulpit oratory first expressed in the form of a letter to *The Examiner* in early 1817 and then, testifying to the particular personal significance of this episode for Hazlitt,

incorporated six years later in the fuller, uncollected essay 'On my First Acquaintance with Poets'. These positive impressions will be contrasted with the sentiments aired in Hazlitt's review of Coleridge's written *Lay Sermons* published for *The Statesman's Manual* in 1816 and 1817.¹ Maintaining my view that Hazlitt's different interpretations of enthusiasm were governed by distinctions of gender, I shall suggest how a gendered perception of enthusiasm and gusto influenced his critical judgement. I shall note in Hazlitt's own use of language the ideological contradictions and stylistic tendencies which indicated a counter-intuitive receptivity to a 'feminine' sentiment or style, and to a feminised discourse of the sublime. This receptivity was evident in Hazlitt's record of his first youthful encounter with the poets, which supplies a useful opening perspective.

Hazlitt's First Acquaintance with Poets

Duncan Wu's recent biography, *Hazlitt, The First Modern Man*, acknowledges the significance of Hazlitt's youthful encounter with Wordsworth and Coleridge in rural Somerset by foregrounding it in the 'Prologue' and heading Part 1 of his book: 'The Road to Nether Stowey'.² Wu's structural decision presents this meeting in the spring of 1798 as a climactic catalyst which was to shape the course of Hazlitt's future life, mould his philosophical perspective and kindle his creative imagination with the secular equivalent of a New Birth

¹ [Review] 1816, *Lay-Sermon on the Distresses of the Country*, *Works*, VII, 114-118; [Review] 1816, *Lay Sermon or the Bible the best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*, *Works*, XVI, 119-128.

² Wu, *First Modern Man*, Ch. 1, pp. 23-40.

experience of revelation. Hazlitt certainly emphasised the significance of the encounter in his biographical 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'.³ This account is nevertheless positioned within the retrospective frame of subsequent disillusionment which imbues the events described and the language used with particular poignancy.

The visit to Nether Stowey, where Hazlitt was to stay for three weeks at Coleridge's invitation, had followed his first encounter with Coleridge in the Unitarian Church in Shrewsbury. There, in 1798, at the age of nineteen, Hazlitt had gone to hear this celebrated poet and philosopher deliver his inaugural sermon, as he prepared to succeed retiring Unitarian minister Mr. Rowe. Highly receptive to the new preacher's personal charisma, Hazlitt had been enraptured by his eloquent expression of moral passion. Afterwards at his home, where Coleridge was staying as his father's guest, Hazlitt observed the details of Coleridge's appearance which seemed to reflect his moral idealism. He remarked on his then glossy black, 'long pendulous hair' as characteristic of 'those whose mind tends heavenwards' and visually reminiscent of Christ. Hazlitt's language identifies such features with the unworldly fervour of the evangelist – of all 'who preach *Christ crucified*', where the religious evangelist is perceived as the epitome of passionate conviction, 'Coleridge at that time being one of those!' Hazlitt honours these sentiments and the genuine promise that Coleridge had possessed. At the same time, his mature retrospective uses such comparisons to expose with gentle satire his own innocent idealism at a time when 'we breathe thick with thoughtless happiness [...] and we repose with undisturbed faith in truth and good'. With affectionate respect, Hazlitt

³ 'On My First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 106-122.

equated this with the optimism of his father. In his view, the idealistic illusions of Rev. Hazlitt's religious faith, fostered in an increasingly isolated situation, were ultimately inadequate substitute for 'the sharpened realities of sense, wit, fancy, or reason'.⁴

This more sober rational perspective did not diminish either the initial impact of youthful passion or its persistent creative influence, however. Hazlitt acknowledged both in his account. With the zeal of a proselyte, if with mild retrospective irony, he expressed the inspirational influence of Coleridge in visionary terms suggestive of divine revelation. The landscape of Llangollen Vale, which Hazlitt passed through on his route from Shropshire to Coleridge's home in Somerset was transfigured with new beauty and significance after reading the poet's 'Ode on the Departing Year': 'That valley was the cradle of a new existence, and in the river that winds through it, my spirit was baptised in the waters of Helicon!'⁵

In view of the communicative gift conferred in scripture by the Pentecostal *tongues* of flame, it seems apposite that Coleridge's enthusiasm should have empowered Hazlitt with a liberating fluency, a fluency which he later presented as a crucial component of gusto, denoting the necessary connection with one's inner energies and the animating principle of life: 'That my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a tongue to express itself, I owe to Coleridge'. Hazlitt's reference to 'understanding' credits the speaker with the power of intellectual enlightenment as well as articulate expression. At the same time, he regretfully accepted that this *spiritually* transformative

⁴ 'First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 109, 117, 110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115. At this impressionable stage, Hazlitt was receptive to the emotional inspiration of a poem felt by some to exhibit a 'dangerous enthusiasm'. *The Critical Review*, 1797, for instance, advised Coleridge that 'Poetical Enthusiasm should take Reason for her Companion', p. 343.

influence had not persisted: 'My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longings infinite and unsatisfied'. The statement admits to a desire for the deeper spiritual fulfilment that Coleridge's visionary philosophy had seemed to promise.⁶

The fact that Hazlitt invested Coleridge with some of the qualities he admired in his father could suggest that the poet had assumed the status of a paternal mentor for the young idealist. This instinct for veneration could be seen to reflect a personal sense of incompleteness articulated in Hazlitt's essay 'On Dreams' written two years after his father's death, in which he confesses to a profound desire to love. He describes a dream in which he was rereading the passage from Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* which had moved him to tears in his youth: 'Trop heureuse d'acheter au prix de ma vie le droit de t'aimer toujours sans crime, et de te le dire encore une fois avant que je meurs'.⁷ The way in which Hazlitt identified these sentiments with the idealism of his youth represents this period as a one of innocent blessedness or an Eden from which he has been excluded by an act of filial betrayal. His youthful adulation of Wordsworth and Coleridge fulfilled 'a need to believe in someone', his later bitter sense of betrayal all the keener for the hopes invested in these idols.⁸

The qualities which Hazlitt noted in Wordsworth on his first meeting with him were in interesting contrast to Coleridge's expansive exuberance. His personal portrait in 'My First Acquaintance' nevertheless emphasises Wordsworth's more austere reserve and spareness identified with manliness,

⁶ 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 115, 107.

⁷ 'On Dreams', *Works*, XII, 17-24 (p. 24).

⁸ Gross, 'Hazlitt's Worshipping Practice', p. 712.

the sparseness figuratively replicated in the 'frugal' nature of his sister Dorothy's repast. Hazlitt noted and later recorded in his essay, 'Mr. Wordsworth', the authoritative 'depth and manliness and rugged harmony' of his voice.⁹ Even the regular pattern of Wordsworth's pacing the gravel walk seemed to denote a purposeful focus and control - if possible inflexibility - in contrast with Coleridge's more impulsive exploratory ramblings. The latter's habit of talking while 'breaking through the straggling branches of a copsewood' perhaps demonstrated the wild and irregular nature of the latter's individual genius, as Hazlitt perceived it.¹⁰ Wordsworth's capacity for passion is acknowledged in the reference to his 'clear gushing accents' and an impulse to humour in the 'convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth', but this was counteracted by the dominant impression of self-discipline which contained and regulated these tendencies. Wordsworth nevertheless combined the concentrated effort and purpose of rational gusto with an emotional receptivity to the visionary beauty of nature. Hazlitt noted the more lyrical visionary eye he was to identify with the poetic sensibility: 'With what eyes that poet sees nature!'¹¹

With the shrewder insight of maturity, Hazlitt acknowledged the seductive power of the *chaunt* in Wordsworth and Coleridge's recitation of their poetry. 'Chaunt' was a verb which Hazlitt applied satirically to church liturgy. The term implicitly recognises the attractive but deceptive authority which this sonorous, parsonic style of recitation conferred on the poets' work. With retrospective wisdom Hazlitt could appreciate how this seductive sonority 'disarms the judgement', remarking on the ironic contrast between

⁹ 'Mr Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 86-95 (p. 91).

¹⁰ 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118, 119, 118.

Wordsworth's apparent pride in the poem and the later judgement of critics.¹² Despite its application to the 'First Methodist', David, 'chaunting' is more suggestive of High Church liturgy than Protestant worship, or the evangelical hymn. Both extremes of Catholic and Methodist devotion were nevertheless seen by critics to share a sensory, even voluptuous mysticism.¹³ Hazlitt's wry reference to Coleridge's and Wordsworth's poetic chanting illustrates his sensitivity to the capacity of voice and emotional timbre to inspire, but also to deceive both speaker and listener.

The qualities of which Hazlitt became increasingly critical in Wordsworth and Coleridge are those which he negatively identified with the religious zealot. In 'My First Acquaintance', Hazlitt describes an attempt during his Somerset sojourn to engage Wordsworth in metaphysical discussion, though without apparently succeeding in making himself 'intelligible'.¹⁴ The focus of the discussion was likely to have been his precociously formulated theory of the disinterestedness of the mind which he later developed and published. As Hazlitt reveals in 'A Reply to Z', his theory was summarily dismissed by Wordsworth as 'what every shoemaker must have thought of'.¹⁵ Smarting at the memory of this rebuff, Hazlitt was to identify this kind of response with the narrow minded intolerance of the religious sectary whose convictions he describes in 'The Tendency of Sects', as breeding 'a contempt for the opinions of others, a jealousy of every difference of sentiment, and a disposition to

¹² 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 118.

¹³ See Lavington's *The Enthusiasm of Papists and Methodists Compared*.

¹⁴ 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 119.

¹⁵ 'A Reply to Z', *Works*, IX, 3-10 (p. 4).

arrogate all sound principle as well as understanding to themselves, and those who think with them'.¹⁶

Although still partly retrospective, the closing paragraph of 'My First Acquaintance' is strangely detached from the rest of the essay in content and tone, and finally returns us quite abruptly to the present. It seems to signal Hazlitt's self-distancing from the intensities of adolescent experience. In his reference to the more equable and urbane qualities of Robert Southey and Charles Lamb, and particularly in his profession of friendship for the latter, Hazlitt gives the impression of having rejected the extremes of enthusiastic zeal related in the rest of the essay. Lamb, with a 'bon-mot' always 'in his mouth', has apparently come to supplant Coleridge. His contrasting temperament is illustrated in the irreverent wit of his retort to a question being hotly debated by Holcroft and Coleridge: which was to be preferred: 'Man as he is, or man as he is to be'; 'Give me', says Lamb, 'Man as he is not to be.'¹⁷ Hazlitt describes this response as the stimulus to a lasting friendship. This might symbolically denote a relinquishment of idealistic illusion and adulation in favour of the more realistic perspective of flawed, but unpretentious, undeluded humanity. Whether this was actually the case for Hazlitt may be deduced from the evidence of the language in which he recorded those early illusions in his account of his first acquaintance with the poets. The essay expresses the writer's own ardent response to the passion of sincere conviction and commitment in Wordsworth and Coleridge. As such it illustrates the reciprocal, sympathetic connectivity of gusto, or genuine enthusiasm. In its

¹⁶ 'Tendency of Sects', *Works*, IV, 47.

¹⁷ 'First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 122.

precarious intensity, however, this ardour contained within it the seeds of its own disillusion.

The scepticism which progressively modified Hazlitt's estimation of Wordsworth's creative enterprise is evident in his measured assessment of *The Excursion* published sixteen years after the initial encounter with the poet. I shall now consider what Hazlitt's various critiques reveal of his increasing ambivalence towards Wordsworth's literary achievement, and how this reflects his estimation of the poet's emotional integrity.

Hazlitt's critical response to Wordsworth's Excursion

Wordsworth's 1814 *Excursion* comprised, in revised form, *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Pedlar*, and other passages of blank verse composed during the year of Hazlitt's visit. It had been projected as a portion of a philosophically authoritative, possibly definitive work, *The Recluse*, Wordsworth having described it, as Francis Jeffrey had noted with some alarm, 'as but a part of the second part of - a long - and laborious work'.¹⁸ As the embodiment of the author's personal philosophy, this was a poem in which Wordsworth had invested much and of which much was expected. Coleridge had expressed his hope that the completed work would represent 'the *first* and *only* true Phil[osophical] Poem in existence'.¹⁹ The poem's publication thus invited a keen critical assessment of its relative success.

¹⁸ Jeffrey, [Review] *Excursion*, *Edinburgh* (1814), p. 235.

¹⁹ Coleridge to Wordsworth, May 30th, 1815, *Letters*, IV, 574.

Although Hazlitt had also written articles for *The Edinburgh* of which Francis Jeffrey was editor, he did not endorse the latter's disparaging estimation of the poem. He acknowledges, however, the awkward and sometimes absurd juxtaposition of grandeur and banality produced through 'the hebetude of his [Wordsworth's] intellect, and the meanness of his subject'.²⁰ Hazlitt admires the elemental power of *The Excursion*, both in its natural context and philosophical vision: 'It has the same vastness and magnificence with the same nakedness and confusion'. He praises the poem's capacity to enlarge and challenge the imagination and engage with wild and unpredictable forces that are 'loose and irregular in the rude chaos of aboriginal nature'.²¹ The language applied to Wordsworth's visionary landscape conveys an authority and mystery that inspires a 'religious' awe. At the same time, Wordsworth's preoccupation with the power of nature signified for Hazlitt a meditative retreat from the public stage of active endeavour that might have been expected from the radical 'Lake School'. Wordsworth's isolated stance was more suggestive of the disconnection of the self-absorbed, ascetic religious enthusiast than the human and social engagement of gusto.

The religious resonance of Wordsworth's visionary landscape is emphasised by G. Barker-Benfield in *The Culture of Sensibility*. In Benfield's view, the qualities of grandeur and mystery were anticipated by the 'true religion' 'of sentiment and feeling' promoted by sects such as Methodism in the course of the eighteenth century. He distinguishes between a formally institutional religion and the 'genuine feelings implanted in us by a God of nature, which has its source in a relish for the sublime and the vast and the

²⁰ 'Mr Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 86.

²¹ 'Observations on Mr Wordsworth's Poem *The Excursion*', *Works*, IV, 111-125 (pp. 111-12).

beautiful'. Such feelings were inevitably 'nourished by poetry and music' and other compositions with a similarly spiritual inspiration. Benfield locates the spiritual receptivity of turn of the century Romanticism in the cult of sensibility which fostered the movements of popular evangelism and was rooted 'in the awakening minds of eighteenth-century women'. This reading reminds us of the way in which the eighteenth-century culture which anticipated Romanticism owed as much to 'feminine' sensibility as enlightenment rationalism.²²

Although, as we have seen, Hazlitt periodically employed the language of sensibility fostered by this culture, his descriptive reference to such wild and untamed natural features as 'bare trees and mountains bare' and the 'rocky fissure [...] caused by thunder' are clearly more resonant of the austere masculine sublime than feminine sensibility. Such elemental strength is opposed, in Hazlitt's analysis, to the tamed harmonies of civilised decorum with their 'box-tree borders', 'gravel walks' and 'square mechanic enclosures'. In its lack of 'hedge row beauties', the stern qualities of Wordsworth's poetic landscape are distinguished from a sense-soothing 'feminine' beauty and accord with Hazlitt's initial impression of the poet's austere demeanour.²³

While Wordsworth might impatiently reject such lyric ornament as 'jewels in the crisped hair, diadems on the polished brow', however, he was elsewhere, as Hazlitt acknowledged in a later essay, equally receptive to delicate examples of natural beauty in details like 'a linnet's nest', which 'startles him with boyish delight', and certainly to more tender domestic feeling.²⁴ This, at times, could invite charges of triviality or sentimentality at odds with his habitual

²² Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 273.

²³ 'Mr Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

loftiness. There is a potential paradox in Wordsworth's location of the domestic affections and simplicities within the grander theatre of the natural sublime with its capacity to elevate or overwhelm the human. This juxtaposition could nevertheless indicate in the poet an equivalent receptiveness to masculine and feminine attributes of grandeur and grace, sternness and tenderness. These opposing tendencies constituted a source of tension in his work and invited the ambivalent responses that his work inspired.

Both solitary and social manifestations of enthusiasm were opposite extremes of religious zeal where they were less easily contained than within the rational framework of aesthetic theory. At the heart of the problematic culture of enthusiasm and the debate surrounding it was the tension between these opposite tendencies toward self-absorption and theatricality, the introvert and the exhibitionist represented in popular evangelism. As I have shown, a wariness of both the sociable and unsocial tendencies of the religious enthusiast persisted into the nineteenth century with particular reference to the culture of revivalism. As Hazlitt's strictly qualified praise suggests, Wordsworth, within his isolated philosophical stance, could be problematically identified with both the mystical intensities of an internal religious enthusiasm and the righteous didacticism of its public assertion. He was aware of the contradictions in Wordsworth's position. The implicit pressure for compromise and moderation could be seen to mirror the need for a reconciliation of feminine and masculine principles to avoid the polarisation that invited conflict and prejudice.

A solitary enthusiast such as Wordsworth is associated with the image of the prophet, the oratorical style and self-importance which Hazlitt satirised in

the figure of David. External, or socially orientated enthusiasm relied on a receptive audience for its techniques of persuasion, exhortation, declamation. As David Riede discusses in *Oracles and Hierophants*, Wordsworth assumed the authority of sage in his self-perception as a 'favoured son' and 'one 'singled out' for a high purpose', although this presumption could again invite the didacticism implicitly directed at a reading audience.²⁵ Hazlitt could recognise that Wordsworth's philosophically isolated stance produced a separation even from nature, which was reconstructed as a theatre for his oracular voice and employed as a source of symbols for self-discovery.

Wordsworth's philosophical detachment resembled the visionary asceticism of the reclusive enthusiast on the opposite end of the spectrum, in Coleridge's definition, from the extraverted fanatic. Despite concerns at Wordsworth's self-isolation, Coleridge might have wished to protect and dignify his solitary enthusiasm, having attempted to distinguish the fanatical social enthusiast who infected others in a crowd from the introverted enthusiast absorbed in his own intense reflections.²⁶ Challenging the terminology of the non-conformist Divine Richard Baxter, Coleridge observed how Baxter made the usual mistake of writing *Fanatic* when he clearly meant 'enthusiast'. This label, in his view, should never be confounded with the socially inflammatory zealot.

The Field Methodists are fanatics, ie....those who catch heat by crowding together round the same Fane... Enthusiasm, on the other hand, implies an

²⁵ Riede, *Oracles*, p. 116.

²⁶ Mee, *Enthusiasm*, Ch. 3, pp.150-164.

undue vividness of ideas, as opposed to perceptions, or of the obscure inward feelings.²⁷

Here the enthusiasm of intense, private, inner feeling is clearly distinguished from the dangerously infectious enthusiasm of the crowd.

Despite Wordsworth's declared aim to connect with common experience, Hazlitt saw in him a monastic self-containment that lacked a capacity for intimate human engagement. Coleridge had observed and regretted the same tendency in Wordsworth, remarking that: 'dear Wordsworth [...] appears to me to have hurtfully segregated and isolated his Being.'²⁸ While Hazlitt and Coleridge could see how Wordsworth drew necessary inspiration from solitude, Hazlitt observed the tendency to 'dry and cold abstraction' in a mind 'coeval with the primary forms of things, and an 'imagination' that 'holds immediately from nature, owing 'no allegiance' but 'to the elements'. The language which Hazlitt applied to Wordsworth's imaginative landscape evokes the dream-like remoteness of a self-absorbed enthusiasm and lack of concrete connection: 'every object is seen through the medium of innumerable recollections, is clothed with the haze of imagination like a glittering vapour, is obscured with the excess of glory, has the shadowy brightness of a waking dream'. The reference in *The Excursion* review to 'innumerable recollections' expresses the self-reflective nature of Wordsworth's visionary imagination which is fed exclusively from inner sources and memories. This is the enthusiasm of the religious contemplative, which is elevated beyond ordinary human concerns, like David, 'on some high tower of his palace', or in common

²⁷ Coleridge, *Notes on the English Divines*, ed. by Derwent Coleridge (London, 1853), p. 39-40, quoted in Klein, p.153.

²⁸ Coleridge to Thomas Poole, May 6th, 1799, *Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), I, 490.

with Wordsworth, peopling 'the viewless tracts of air', or 'convers[ing] with the silent clouds'.²⁹ It is an enthusiasm remote from the urgent, electric connectedness of Hazlitt's gusto.

Hazlitt suggests that despite Wordsworth's claim to be sympathetically connected with ordinary experience, the figures and narrative incident of *The Excursion* are little more than symbolic embodiments of Wordsworth's moral preoccupations, the three figures of the Solitary, The Wanderer and the Poet no more than self-projections, living 'in the busy solitude of his own heart'. The language which Hazlitt applied in his original review of the poem is in itself exalted and abstract in its praise for the poem's 'depth, originality, truth, beauty and grandeur'.³⁰ Far from being inflammatory, Wordsworth's visionary inspiration represents the opposite extreme of the religious enthusiasm which infects the crowd. Riede echoes Hazlitt's insights when he describes Wordsworth's 'idealised and personal vision of nature' as 'a window to the poet's oracular mind, rather than to nature'.³¹

Jon Mee argues that the solitary tendency of Wordsworth's enthusiasm could be seen as supplying a form of regulation by imposing a meditative discipline that constrained and controlled the expansive tendency of the emotions and imagination. Wordsworth is careful to assert as much in his self-representation in *The Prelude* as 'self-willed/Yet temperate and reserved, and wholly free/From dangerous passions'.³² A literal physical solitude would also mitigate the socially infectious potential of this enthusiasm. This physical and

²⁹ 'Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem, *The Excursion*', *Works*, IV, 111-125 (pp. 112-13).

³⁰ Original Review, 1814, 'The Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem *The Excursion*', *Works*, XIX, 9-25 (p.11). Hazlitt excised this last quoted tribute from the 1817 published version of the review, however.

³¹ Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, p. 159.

³² *Prelude*, VII, 70-2.

mental separateness nevertheless resulted in the internal concentration of Wordsworth's creative energies and removed the communicative responsibility through which one maintains social connection.

Hazlitt saw in Wordsworth the righteous self-conviction he felt to be characteristic of the mind of the religious zealot, who, 'from considering all objections [...] "null and void," [...] becomes so thoroughly satisfied with its own conclusions, as to render any farther examination of them superfluous, and confounds its exclusive pretensions to reason with the absolute possession of it'.³³ He deplored the fixity and rigidity of principle which characterised evangelical extremism, regretting the lack of the flexibly generous adjustment which involved an ability to acknowledge personal weakness without which the broader human connectedness implicit in the concept of 'gusto' was impossible. He could nevertheless sympathetically appreciate in Wordsworth the fundamental insecurity of one who, like the religious sectarian, was obliged to defend an embattled position and 'exaggerates [his] own merits when they are denied by others'.³⁴

Hazlitt's disappointment at Wordsworth's progressive disengagement is indirectly expressed in the review's wistful tribute to the youthful aspirations which the poet had once inspired at 'that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own'. In both review and the 'First Acquaintance' essay Hazlitt uses a heightened visionary language and scriptural metaphor evocative of his father's religious aspiration. In the latter he refers to that time of youthful idealism when, 'in a state between sleeping and waking, [we] have indistinct

³³ 'Tendency of Sects', *Works*, IV, 47.

³⁴ 'Mr. Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 94.

but glorious glimpses of strange shapes'.³⁵ This is echoed in his allusion, in the *Excursion* review, to a time when 'the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending like the steps of Jacob's ladder in bright and never-ending succession'.³⁶ In an assertion enhanced by nostalgic recollection, Hazlitt declares a willingness to trade all the sophisticated accomplishment and intellectual shrewdness of his maturity for an innocent simplicity of faith. 'Am I better than I was then? Oh no! One truth discovered, one pang of regret at not being able to express it, is better than all the fluency and flippancy in the world. Would I could go back to what I then was!'³⁷ Hazlitt rejected a comfortably urbane eloquence in favour of an honest frustration at being unable to articulate the higher possibilities of experience or knowledge that might lie outside conventionally approved limits or language. He honoured this struggle and the capacity to acknowledge one's insufficiency as more honest than any pretension to a monopoly on truth in the context of philosophy, politics or religion. He continued to cherish the dream and the youthful enthusiasm with which it was identified as more genuine and precious than the sober perspective of maturity.

Although, for Hazlitt, such hopes could not be restored by the consolations of formal religion – not by 'all the chauntings of *Te Deums* in all the churches of Christendom' – the scriptural metaphor and language of the sublime conjures the impression of a visionary dimension of future possibility into which the mind projects itself imaginatively: 'In our dreams the fullness of the

³⁵ 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 116.

³⁶ 'Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's *Excursion*', *Works*, IV, 120.

³⁷ 'First Acquaintance', *Works*, XVII, 114.

blood gives warmth and reality to the coinage of the brain [...] and there is always something to come better than what we see'.³⁸

For the older Wordsworth and Coleridge, the enthusiastic idealism of youth became a source not of continuing inspiration, but of embarrassment, its goals of intellectual and political freedom dismissed as immature delusion. This youthful fervour was rejected in favour of a more chastened enthusiasm regulated by reason.³⁹ In *The Excursion*, the Solitary – and Wordsworth's – initial perception of the revolutionary ideals as: 'Glory – beyond all glory ever seen' had transmuted to appalled disgust at the 'aims of fiercer zealots'.⁴⁰ In Hazlitt's extended quotation from Wordsworth's account of the Solitary's disenchantment, his capitalisation of the final line 'Such recantation had for me no charm/ Nor would I bend to it' imbues the line with a keenly personal resonance. The older Coleridge similarly came to regard those early dreams as a misdirection of his energies:

O liberty! With profitless endeavour

Have I pursued thee many a weary hour⁴¹

For Hazlitt, the poets' rejection of those libertarian visions signified a fall from grace indeed.

Although admitting in the *Excursion* review that 'we cannot weave over again the airy unsubstantial dream which reason and experience have dispelled', Hazlitt recognised that 'we will never cease, nor can be prevented

³⁸ 'Wordsworth's *Excursion*', *Works*, IV, 120; 'First Acquaintance', pp. 116-17.

³⁹ See Mee's discussion of 'Wordsworth's 'Chastened Enthusiasm' in Ch. 5 of *Romanticism*.

⁴⁰ 'Wordsworth's *Excursion*', *Works*, IV, 118.

⁴¹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, quoting France, *a Palinodia* (facsimile edn, repr. Yorkshire: The Scolar Press, 1971), I, 194.

from returning on the wings of imagination to the bright dream of our youth; that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty'.⁴² The sublime abstraction of the language expresses an allegiance to truth in the form of inner conviction, and while not expressing specifically religious aspiration, has the visionary dimension of a remote, possibly unattainable, but necessary ideal; it acknowledges a desire for completion that is perhaps impossible within a temporal context. This utopian vision is typically interpreted in purely political terms, and rested on a faith in human and social possibility. At the same time, despite Hazlitt's admission of disenchantment, he was disillusioned more by the perceived cowardice and faithlessness of others than in a personal loss of faith. Hazlitt maintained a capacity for hope which supplied a source of positive energy more powerful than the sceptical realism of the post radical Romantic. This hope was naturally a staple motivator of a religious visionary like his father and Hazlitt remained faithful to the spirit it represented, if not the doctrine which inspired it.

Hazlitt considered Wordsworth's political apostasy to have been creatively emasculating, disconnecting his imagination from the field of social and political struggle. 'the mighty struggles and untameable passions of daring men' in favour of contemplative rural seclusion. As he expresses it in a later review that registered the poet's increasing taste for domestic seclusion: 'The voice of war, whether raised by Freedom or oppression, scares him'. He has 'no tale, instinct with energy to tell, illustrative of any truth of vital importance to mankind'.⁴³ Wordsworth's poetic style, in Hazlitt's opinion, consequently lacked both the combative vigour and the rugged, more instinctive rhythms and

⁴² 'Wordsworth's Excursion', *Works*, IV, 119.

⁴³ [Review] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (1827), *London Weekly Review*, Wu, Hazlitt's *New Writings*, II, 36-44 (p. 38).

uneven spontaneity, which, in effective prose style, reflected the gusto of intense personal engagement. Hazlitt believed that this apparent failure of personal engagement inevitably failed to establish a meaningful connection with the reader:

If the objects (whether persons or things) which he makes use of as the vehicle of his feelings had been to convey them in all their force and depth to others, then the production before us would indeed have 'produced a monument,' as he himself wishes it, worthy of the author, and of his country.⁴⁴

Hazlitt regretted the lack of courage expressed in Wordsworth's instinct for retreat and tamer domestic preferences. Such preferences signalled a desire to avoid the passions that rocked and disturbed the roots of our complacencies, passions that expressed the restless, windy energy evoked by the very term 'gusto'.

In the next section I shall compare Hazlitt's estimation of Wordsworth's reclusive enthusiasm with his account of Coleridge's expansive communicativeness. The latter quality was the impulsive ardour and energy which, in the context of religious zeal, Hazlitt also interpreted as an indulgence of 'blind faith and headstrong imagination'.⁴⁵ I shall consider what Hazlitt's critique reveals of his implicit distinction between gusto and religious enthusiasm, its gendered connotations, and his own ambivalent relationship to the feminine. Hazlitt's youthful admiration of the genuine fervour of

⁴⁴ 'Wordsworth's Excursion', *Works*, XI, 125.

⁴⁵ 'On Depth and Superficiality', *Works*, XII, 346-360 (p. 351).

Coleridge's inaugural pulpit address will be contrasted with his sceptical assessment of his method and meaning in the written *Lay Sermons*. I shall explore the reasons for his disillusionment.

Coleridge's charismatic pulpit style

Hazlitt's changing perception of Coleridge is powerfully illustrated in his letter to *Examiner* editor, Leigh Hunt. This was published in the January following the publication of his extended critique of Coleridge's written *Lay Sermons* on December 29th, 1816.⁴⁶ The letter emphasised the contrast between Hazlitt's initial delight at Coleridge's passionate address in the Unitarian pulpit in Shrewsbury nineteen years before with what he considered the self-indulgent meanderings of the *Sermons*. This retrospective account was doubtless the result of some sober reflection on the difference in Coleridge, and Hazlitt's relationship with him, and would have emphasised the evaporation of the idealism that had transfigured the time of their first acquaintance.

Hazlitt expressed the impact of Coleridge's inaugural sermon in a quoted tribute from Rousseau's *Confessions*: 'Il y a des impressions que ni le temps ni le circonstances peuvent effacer. Dusse-je vivre des siècles entiers, le doux temps de ma jeunesse ne peut renaître pour moi, ni s'effacer jamais dans ma mémoire.'⁴⁷ This impression of Coleridge's early magnetism is succeeded by the tersely ironic: 'It was the author of the 'Lay Sermon'.⁴⁸ Hazlitt

⁴⁶ 'Mr. Coleridge's Lay Sermon: To the Editor of the Examiner', *Works*, VII, 128-29.

⁴⁷ 'First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 108.

⁴⁸ 'Mr. Coleridge's Lay Sermon', *Works*, VII, 128.

acknowledged the associated charisma of poetic and religious inspiration in admitting being curious to see ‘a poet and philosopher getting up into the pulpit to preach’ in what would ‘seem a revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity’.⁴⁹ This ‘primitive spirit’ is identified with the passionate conviction and reformist energy to which Hazlitt was so receptive in spoken or written expression. The primitive fervour of the early Christian discipleship was also something that the early Methodist mission had attempted to emulate.

Hazlitt’s rhapsodic response to Coleridge’s address: ‘I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres’, reflected his wonder at the way in which he seemed to unite the highest levels of thought and feeling, demonstrating the intuitively assured union of heart and mind that denoted gusto. The statement: ‘Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced under the eye and with the sanction of Religion’ expresses a divine creative synthesis remote from the diffuse fragmentation in what he judged the unconvincing rhetoric of the later *Lay Sermons*. Hazlitt’s elevated abstractions evoke a sublime authority which conveys the spiritual inspiration of enthusiasm. The power of Coleridge’s words for Hazlitt possessed the resonance of a ‘prayer’ [which] ‘floated in solemn silence through the universe’. Although associated with enthusiastic religious discourse, the visionary rhetoric that Hazlitt applied to Coleridge’s pulpit address does not denote a vapid inflation, but a genuine inspiration. The exalted language may have reflected Hazlitt’s youthful idealism, but it also expressed his sense of the speaker’s genuine passionate connection with human experience which seemed to him to resonate ‘from the bottom of the human

⁴⁹ ‘First Acquaintance with Poets’, *Works*, XVII, 108.

heart'. In a recent study, Mark Canuel acknowledges the evangelical character of Coleridge's sentiments in his reference to Coleridge's writing having been shown to 'bear the marks of an evangelical or Methodist corruption and affirmation of affective religious community'.⁵⁰

Hazlitt would undoubtedly admire the evidence of Coleridge's own moral principles in his discourse on moral decay and his engagement with issues of social injustice. Coleridge appealed both to reason and imagination in his vivid descriptive portrait of the 'simple shepherd boy' sacrificed to the political logic of war and 'tricked out in the loathsome finery of the profession of blood'.⁵¹ In its image of soaring power, Hazlitt's representation of Coleridge as 'an eagle dallying with the wind' suggests a confident mastery of the elements, an assured command both of theme and language. Coleridge's chosen text: 'And he went up into the mountain to pray, HIMSELF, ALONE', (with the emphatic pronunciation of the final words denoted by Hazlitt's capitalisation), might also be seen to reflect the speaker's sense of personal importance in the tradition of the enthusiastic visionary. Certainly Hazlitt was impressed by the authority which Coleridge projected and the power he generated. Although Coleridge's speaking style was admired, however, he was often seen as addressing rather than communicating with his auditors. The context and demand of pulpit address require a theatrical projection and exaggeration which contains within it the potential for deception in its relation to entertainment. As with King David, this larger than life self-projection is also a component of gusto. In their persuasive capacity to 'disarm the judgement', these techniques of self-

⁵⁰ Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration and British Writing 1790-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 103.

⁵¹ 'First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 108.

dramatisation nevertheless demonstrated both the positive, and deceptively seductive potential of the enthusiastic style.

Despite the visionary character of Hazlitt's written tribute, the sensory dimension felt to characterise much evangelical preaching is also hinted at in his description of Coleridge's voice rising 'like a stream of rich distilled perfumes' which positively expresses the seductive impact of his physical charisma.⁵² Sensory appeal and indulgence was associated with the feminine or effeminate, and influenced hostile perceptions of the emasculating impact both of popular Protestant and Catholic 'superstition'. Paradoxically, however, this appeal to the senses in a spiritual context is suggestive of the holistic engagement of 'gusto', although the sensory appeal of 'rich distilled perfumes' is more exotic and feminine than the robust qualities implicit in 'gusto'.

In his emphasis on the physical aspects and sensory appeal of Coleridge's communicative style, Hazlitt implicitly acknowledges such influential components of delivery as expressive intonation, emphasis, timbre and pace. In his critical awareness of effective theatrical technique, he was similarly aware of the crucial relationship between body and voice in effective oratory. Certainly, the skills of physical projection crucially influenced the charismatic impact of Methodist preachers like Whitefield and Wesley. In contrast, the absence of the physical energies of gusto in the disembodied written rhetoric of Coleridge's later *Lay Sermons* seemed, for Hazlitt, to undermine its communicability. The latter was an attribute to which Hazlitt was always critically receptive irrespective of any personal sympathy with political or ideological content of a speech, a fact demonstrated in his persistent admiration

⁵² 'First Acquaintance with Poets', *Works*, XVII, 108.

of Burke's rhetorical method despite his change of political direction. While honouring the gusto of dynamic presentation, however, Hazlitt advocated a restrained force in oral delivery in contrast with the extravagant demonstrations of popular exhortation labelled absurd or effeminate.

Visionary balloons: Hazlitt's disillusionment

The generic heading, *Lay Sermons*, which Coleridge applied to his philosophical meditations published in *The Statesman's Manual* in 1816 makes claim to a serious but didactic purpose and invites comparison between the genres of oral sermon and written thesis. At the same time, it reminds us of the absence in the text of those persuasive rhetorical markers of gesture and physical presence which serve either to reinforce a preacher's message or distract listeners' attention from any deficiency of content or argument. Hazlitt was alert, in the more inert medium of Coleridge's written prose, to the weaknesses of argument and style that he also discerned in the enthusiastic rhetoric of Methodism: 'a set of phrases which [...] baffle common sense', and also quick to detect evidence of sentimental falsity or affectation.⁵³ In the oracular style, structure and content of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*, Hazlitt identifies the feminine characteristics of the popular enthusiastic style, the atmospheric feminine metaphors he applies contrasting with the more vigorous and muscular metaphor applied in earlier tributes. Hazlitt's changing language seems to reflect the way in which the original gusto of a rationally focused

⁵³ 'Causes of Methodism', *Works*, IV, 60.

conviction has progressively dissolved into fluid and elusive speculation or been inflated into balloons of visionary abstraction.

Hazlitt applies the image of a balloon to Coleridge's rhetoric, and, in his 1816 reviews for *The Examiner* of some of his *Lay Sermons*, specifically to his personal disillusionment. In his letter of 1817 to Hunt, the editor of the *Examiner*, Hazlitt describes the deflation of his early expectations in the expressive analogy of being flung from the balloon in which Coleridge had made his first confident ascent', demanding to know 'what right' he had 'to throw me from the height of his career upon the ground, and dash me to pieces?'.⁵⁴ The metaphor is variously suggestive. Although the essential absurdity of this image of deflation would seem to cancel any dignity, the balloon can still imply the exalted capacity of the creative imagination. But it also negatively evokes inflated rhetoric and elsewhere, inaccessible philosophical speculation, as well as supplying the familiar analogy of hot air. As such, it seems symbolically to encapsulate the extreme, opposed potential of enthusiasm for exalted flights and bathos. Importantly, Hazlitt's image of deflation also conveys the self-deceptive, illusory capacity of religious enthusiasm both for the enthusiast and those moved by his elevated style and vision. 'I begin to suspect', he declared in his letter, 'my faith in Mr. Coleridge's great powers must have been a vision of my youth'.⁵⁵ As such, it is inevitably associated with adolescent idealism and later disillusionment. The visionary balloon, though a source of inspiration, lacks the secure anchorage in reason and connection with reality which is a key component of the more rationally grounded gusto.

⁵⁴ 'Mr Coleridge's Lay Sermon', *Works*, VII, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Hazlitt was originally elevated by one of the balloons of 'youthful Enthusiasm' and 'air-built Castles' from which Coleridge later disassociated himself in an embarrassed rejection of the supposed naivety of his early radicalism.⁵⁶ For Hazlitt, however, the political and moral convictions which had inspired Coleridge's zeal in the Unitarian pulpit demonstrated the gusto of rational wisdom. Despite the persistent association of 'enthusiasm' with immature illusion, there was an interesting difference between the older Coleridge's denigration of his youthful enthusiasm, and Hazlitt's persistent loyalty to his original political ideals, in which the heady flights of early enthusiasm appear to have been grounded in the focused, if uncompromising, commitment to principle implicit in 'gusto'. The principle of gusto may have been a mature substitute for the idealism of Hazlitt's youthful enthusiasms, but did not, in my view, signify a rejection of the hopes and beliefs enshrined in that enthusiasm.

Implicit in the visionary language which Hazlitt applied both positively and negatively to Coleridge's style are the elements of air and water – the restless fluidity of water and insubstantiality of air, both expressive of the reflective deceptiveness of illusion. In keeping with the religious connotations of enthusiasm, the metaphors used for Coleridge's inspired fluency are also resonant scriptural metaphors, *water* denoting the spiritual life force and renewal embodied in Christ who shall lead the faithful 'unto living fountains of waters'. 'Light' has obvious revelatory and visionary associations.⁵⁷ Watery metaphors were commonly applied to the quality of Coleridge's conversation in particular, as Seamus Perry illustrates in his essay on Coleridge's speaking

⁵⁶ *The Friend*, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), II, 11, p. 147.

⁵⁷ Revelations: 7: 17 ('Authorised' version).

style.⁵⁸ Perry gives the example of Julius Charles Hare's tribute to the 'ever varying hues' of Coleridge's conversation, its 'sparkling lights' and 'oceanic ebb and flow'. The imagery expresses a brilliance which is restless and ephemeral, glancing and dissolving.⁵⁹ The qualities are undoubtedly dazzling, but distracting and deceptive, both for the speaker and his auditors. The seductive power with which Coleridge was credited is also suggestive of a monologic narcissism which left no room for response. This was a not uncommon criticism of the enthusiastic presumption of the pulpit evangelist who 'entertains no doubts that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion'.⁶⁰

Coleridge's restlessly compulsive talk might have been an ultimately futile attempt to capture the glittering fragments of knowledge and vision and unify them conceptually and linguistically, driven unconsciously by a fear of the silence which would otherwise envelop and obliterate him. Hazlitt had also applied the water metaphor to Wordsworth's verse in *The Excursion*, where it conveys the self-momentum of a harmonious but rather monotonous fluency. The self-reflective and narcissistic connotations of the water metaphor also suggest an emotional self-absorption and majestic indifference to the passing details of human life. 'All accidental vagaries and individual contrasts are lost in an endless continuity of feeling, like drops of water in the ocean-stream!'⁶¹ This image of Wordsworth is more allied to the lofty enthusiasm of the religious mystic as critically perceived and opposed to the principle of connectedness enshrined in 'gusto'.

⁵⁸ Seamus Perry, 'The Talker', *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. by Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 103-25.

⁵⁹ *Table Talk* I, cix, quoted in above, p. 105.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey, *Edinburgh*. See page 175-176, Ch. 6, in this thesis.

⁶¹ [Review] *Lay Sermon on Distresses*, *Works*, VII, 115.

In his review of Coleridge's *Lay Sermon on the Distresses of the Country* Hazlitt acknowledges the speaker's 'great powers of thought and fancy' but in his remark that his Sermon 'is a masterpiece of its kind, having neither beginning, middle, nor end', satirises the lack of focus and direction, the indulgent, diffusive meandering which he explicitly condemned in the pulpit rhetoric of popular enthusiasm.⁶² It was a view which typified Hazlitt's opposition to rhetorical pretension in any context. Religious enthusiasts, with their inflated claims to divine favour and communion, were thus most exposed to attack in this respect. As in religious enthusiasm, Coleridge's structural looseness and incoherence would seem to denote a lack of intellectual rigour, but more importantly, a failure of moral conviction and connection. This view prompts the harsh concluding observation, sharpened by a very personal disillusionment, that: 'If he [Coleridge], had had but common moral principle, that is, sincerity, he would have been a great man'.⁶³ It was a principle which shaped his judgement of all religious, and particularly Methodist enthusiasm, which in his view absolved 'the understanding from the rules of reasoning, and the conscience from the restraints of morality, throwing the whole responsibility upon a vicarious righteousness and an abstract belief'.⁶⁴ Hazlitt applies satirically a feminised religious language both to the obscurity and over-refinement of Coleridge's discourse: 'His are all maiden ideas; immaculate conceptions', with its pervasive sense of aspiration unmatched by achievement. To emphasise his sense of Coleridge's communicative failure, Hazlitt unfavourably compares what he sees as his Sermon's abortive effusions with those of the religious enthusiast, Joanna Southcott, whose 'vagaries,

⁶² [Review] *Lay Sermon on Distresses*, *Works*, VII, 114.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶⁴ 'On Depth and Superficiality', *Works*, XII, 351.

whimsies and pregnant throes were sober and rational, compared with Mr. Coleridge's qualms and crude conceptions, and promised deliverance in this Lay-Sermon'.⁶⁵

This sense of elevated disconnection is reinforced in Hazlitt's suggestion that Coleridge's *Lay Sermon* resembles the coffin of Mahomet 'suspended between heaven and earth' in its apparent failure both to reach the heights of visionary insight and connect with human reality.⁶⁶ It suggests the 'lofty, abstract enthusiasm' which Hazlitt attributed to the prophet David. The image also implies a failure to effectively synchronise the more rational stimulus of gusto and spiritual inspiration of a religiously connotated enthusiasm. Gusto, as a connected and connecting force, is crucially identified with effective communication. It is thus not a virtue evident in discourse which fails to make itself intelligible and, apparently indifferent to the actual needs of the Reading Public, remains floating in the ether.

The metaphors applied by Hazlitt to Coleridge's cast of mind and expression conspicuously lack the toughness and sharpness of gusto's substance, and are instead loose, ephemeral, aerial, and stereotypically feminine, or effeminate: 'floating and unfixed'. The most decisive line of thought is 'lighter than the gossamer "that wantons in the idle summer-air"', the brightest of his schemes a bubble blown by an infant's breath, that rises, glitters, bursts in the same instant'. They are images which, in their reflective evanescence, resemble the water metaphors applied by auditors to Coleridge's speech.⁶⁷ Hazlitt significantly felt that Coleridge's style lacked both

⁶⁵ [Review] *Lay Sermon on Distresses*, *Works*, VII, 101.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.117.

succinctness and the 'fire and vehemence' needed to 'lift it'.⁶⁸ Most importantly, despite the sublime potential which the language implicitly acknowledges, it evokes an exploratory, but directionless intellect no longer driven by the will and sense which constitutes gusto and maturity. His elevated but ungrounded rhetoric might seem to illustrate the Methodistical conflict between the 'passions and the understanding' which Hazlitt attributed to the religious enthusiast, David.⁶⁹

Again the ethereal, angelic metaphors are applied to Coleridge's inspirational potential. However, the Miltonic image of the 'arc angel ruin'd' with 'excess/Of glory obscur'd', though satirically inflected, is a clear religious perception of fall from grace. Various supernatural metaphors, especially the frivolous characterization of Coleridge as 'The Cock Lane Ghost', a knocking spirit that supposedly haunted the vicinity of Cock Lane in 1762, further emphasises the disembodied, insubstantial nature of one, who in his philosophical speculations, is a mystery both to himself and others. The Cock Lane analogy questions Coleridge's intellectual integrity by indirectly associating him not just with the spurious ghost but with credulous advocates like the Methodist sympathiser, Lord Dartmouth, who authorised a committee of enquiry into the supernatural mystery. Hogarth symbolically represented this superstition as another species of Enthusiasm in the print *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism*, discussed in Chapter 1.⁷⁰

Hazlitt's review satirically evokes the exalted character of Coleridge's style in terms that combine the sublime and the absurd.

⁶⁸ Paulin, *Day Star*, p. 187.

⁶⁹ See discussion of King David in Ch. 7, pp. 241-46 in this thesis.

⁷⁰ See E.J. Clery's discussion of the case of the Cock Lane Ghost of *The Rise of the Supernatural in Fiction 1762 – 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Ch. 1. [There is reference to Hogarth's print in Ch. 1, p. 22. See Appendix, p. 332].

He soars up to heaven, circles the empyrean, or dives to the centre of the earth, but he neither lays his hands upon the treasures of the age, nor can find a resting place for his feet in the other. He is no sooner borne to the utmost point of his ambition, than he is hurried away from it again by the same fantastic impulse or his own specific levity⁷¹

Hazlitt's observation, in his review, that Coleridge's 'genius has angels' wings' acknowledges the soaring, inspirational quality of Coleridge's rhetoric, echoing the language in which he recorded his early response to his inaugural sermon.⁷² There is nevertheless a significant difference in Hazlitt's choice of metaphor for his early and later responses to Coleridge's soaring capacity. To the young Hazlitt, Coleridge in his oral Shropshire sermon commands the elements like an eagle, while in the rhetoric of his *Lay Sermons*, he rises on the wings of an angel and circles the empyrean. The image of an eagle, iconic, symbolic, though vividly present to the senses, has an authority which is both masculine and physical. It is redolent of a dangerous power in which the precisely imagined clawed feet and beak have the capacity for challenge and attack and are expressive, respectively, of power and sharp reaction. By contrast, the angelic imagery employed by Hazlitt in his reviews of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons* are more expressive of disengagement. This picture of elevated obscurity is further wittily satirised by Hazlitt in an 1828 description of Coleridge in *The London Weekly Review* as one whose

⁷¹ [Review] *Lay Sermon on Distresses*, *Works*, VII, 117.

⁷² *Ibid.*

disciples, to whom darkness is visible, should they stand beside us [...] point out to us a strange being, 'aloft, incumbent on the dusky air, that feels *unusual weight*' ; but we can distinguish neither 'member, joint, nor limb'. This makes us peevish: We cannot tell whether it be an eagle or an owl.⁷³

Hazlitt pays tribute in his review to Coleridge's creative genius and intellectual energy, acknowledging that 'his genius has angels' wings'. However, the qualifying clause, 'but neither hands nor feet', condemns Coleridge's lack of rational grounding.⁷⁴ Implicit in 'hands' is the idea of *grasp*, possession, while 'feet' suggests stability and consistency, a grounded and coherent sense of self. The whole image implies a lack of communicative facility, of personal and human connectedness, a failure 'to stand himself and bid others stand!' The visionary imagery applied to Coleridge elevates the subject, but at the same time renders him inaccessible and incomprehensible. The tone of this review of Coleridge's *Lay Sermon on The Distresses of the Country* is satirical rather than adulatory, while the metaphors confer absurdity rather than grace in their evocation of a philosophical preacher disappearing into the misty 'labyrinths' of his own metaphysical speculation. Hazlitt's use of the expression 'fantastic impulse' for the aerial swoops of Coleridge's argument suggests an undisciplined impulsiveness and spontaneity.⁷⁵ The latter was a quality which Hazlitt both applauded and criticised. The quality of spontaneity which characterises enthusiastic inspiration was both valued and mistrusted though positively equated with the energy compulsively driving creative expression. Within the culture of Romanticism, creative inspiration was perceived as an

⁷³ [Review] *Coleridge's Works, New Writings*, II, 127-135 (pp.127-8).

⁷⁴ [Review] *Lay Sermon on Distresses*, *Works*, VII, 117.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 117.

impulsive movement of the heart and identified with the elemental energies of wind, fire, and welling springs: 'Surprised by joy/Impatient as the Wind'.⁷⁶ A loss of this spontaneity is inevitably associated with a loss of inspiration: 'I see, not feel, how beautiful they are'.⁷⁷ At the same time, it was, more vulgarly, associated with the emotional self-indulgence felt to characterise the verbatim, feminine effusions of the field preacher or prophet of Methodist itinerancy. In criticisms of spontaneous discourse, there is also the implicit aesthetic judgement of 'cumbrous' stylistic inelegance. Hazlitt's modifier 'fantastic' additionally suggests disproportion to an absurd degree, and a disconnection with reality, both complaints commonly directed against the enthusiastic religious visionary.

The meandering style which Hazlitt condemned in Coleridge expressed the indecisive irresolution he judged effeminate. His lack of focus and discipline was similarly considered a feminine weakness, as perhaps, also, was the seductive, soporific effect of his continuous, melodic, but strangely 'monotonous' prose. As such, it failed to provide the challenge and engagement which Hazlitt considered crucial to a genuinely communicative enthusiasm, or gusto. Certainly, it failed to achieve the dialogic engagement for which he aimed. The metaphors of balloons and water are expressive of fluidity but formlessness or an ungrounded airy inflation. This kind of rhetoric is sharply contrasted, by Hazlitt, with the passionate oratory of Edmund Burke. The spoken rhetoric of this Irish politician, like that of Coleridge, had inspired the young Hazlitt, but, in contrast with Coleridge's waning appeal, continued to

⁷⁶ Wordsworth, sonnet, *Shorter Poems 1807-1820*, ed. by Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 112, l.1.

⁷⁷ Coleridge, *Poetical Works I*, ed. by J.C.C. Mays, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 699, l. 38.

inspire his admiration, and detailed stylistic critiques. Despite possessing the soaring qualities that evoked the same eagle image Hazlitt applied to Coleridge's inaugural sermon, Burke's rhetoric was securely grounded.

It differs from poetry, as I conceive, like the chamois from the eagle; it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, is picturesque, sublime – but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clammers up by abrupt and intricate ways, and browses on the roughest bark [...] The principle which guides his pen is truth, not beauty – not pleasure, but power.⁷⁸

There is no danger of the vision conjured by Burke's prose dissolving in the ether; it is tangibly supported by sense and personal conviction. The rock on which the metaphorical chamois is poised expresses ruggedness, though its breadth of taste from 'roughest bark' to 'tender flower' incorporates toughness and sensitivity, suggesting a creative and stylistic versatility and sympathetic range. The aerial and aquatic imagery which predominated in Hazlitt's, and others' descriptions of Coleridge's expression certainly convey a visionary expansiveness but one lacking the solid connection and grounding evoked by images of striking flint and the rocky footholds of the mountain-leaping chamois.

Hazlitt acknowledged that Burke's style might sacrifice the conventional aesthetic standards of continual elegance and grace, but with a compensatory force and an originality of personal enquiring engagement rather than

⁷⁸ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 10.

compliant conformity. Hazlitt's positive estimation of Burke's animated oratory was based on its integrity and consequent communicability. Coleridge's contrasting, narcissistic oratory expressed the self-absorption, described elsewhere by Hazlitt, of the 'singer thinking of himself and not of the woman before him'.⁷⁹ The underlying rational control with which Hazlitt credited Burke's oratorical style was expressive of gusto rather than the pulpit enthusiasm typically associated with undisciplined self-indulgence. Paulin attributes Hazlitt's admiration for Burke's style to its verve and rugged individuality, rugged being the distinctively masculine quality also associated with Wordsworth. Hazlitt's description of Burke as a Romantic 'genius' of 'high and enthusiastic fancy' celebrates his imaginative energy and inspiration.⁸⁰ This Romantic enthusiasm might implicitly challenge the classical virtues of ordered restraint, yet it remained controlled by a focused intellect that eschewed effeminate diffusiveness.

A sense of vacuous verbosity is further expressed in the airy metaphors which Hazlitt applied to Coleridge's communicative style 'swelling and turgid – everlastingly aiming to be greater than his subject, filling his fancy with fumes and vapours in the pangs and throes of miraculous parturition, and bringing forth only still births'.⁸¹ This expression of futile and unproductive effort echoes his view of the unfulfilled promise of Wordsworth's *Excursion* similarly described by Hazlitt, quoting David Hume's reception of his own treatise, as having fallen 'stillborn from the press'.⁸² The image revealingly recalls the abortive extravagancies of the New Birth experience of revivalist

⁷⁹ [Review] *The Atlas*, [Signor Zuchelli's Benefit] 'Italian Opera', *Hazlitt's New Writings*, II, 261.

⁸⁰ 'Character of Mr Burke', *Works*, VII, 301-313 (pp. 302, 312).

⁸¹ 'Prose Style of Poets', *Works*, XII, 15.

⁸² 'Mr. Wordsworth', *Works*, XI, 91.

testimony, in which, as Addison phrased it, a Mind under the influence of religious enthusiasm is deluded into thinking that it is 'blown up by something Divine within her'.⁸³ Addison's feminine pronoun and pregnancy metaphor and Hazlitt's maternal labour analogy similarly demonstrate the routine effeminising of unproductive, inflated enthusiasm. The narcissism and self-involvement identified with effeminacy denotes a failure of the creative expansiveness that ensures communicability and connection.

Critical of rhetorical posturing on the page or stage, Hazlitt claimed that 'every actor knows that the quieter he speaks, the closer he can be to himself'.⁸⁴ He saw in Coleridge a declining capacity for that internal, attentive listening to oneself which was the source of self-knowledge. The poet-philosopher's career exhibited a degeneration of the enthusiasm of genuine conviction into the 'cant' of pulpit performance, 'the voluntary overcharging or prolongation of a real sentiment'.⁸⁵ Coleridge's inflated prose illustrated Hazlitt's contention that: 'as our interest in anything wears out in time, and habit, we exaggerate the outward symptoms of zeal as mechanical helps to devotion, dwell the longer on our words as they are less felt, and hence the very origin of the word 'cant''. The term 'cant' evoked the verbal posturing that Hazlitt had negatively identified with Methodism, with 'its rant, its vulgarity, and amatory style' generated by a 'vicarious righteousness'.⁸⁶

For Hazlitt, 'cant', as the exaggerated language of a mechanically simulated emotion indicated not just the disjunction between belief and action which 'hypocrisy' denoted but the sadder absence of real feeling and vain attempts to

⁸³ Joseph Addison, *The Evidences of the Christian Religion* (London: 1730), p. 163.

⁸⁴ 'On Cant and Hypocrisy', *Works*, XVII, 354.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ 'On Depth and Superficiality', *Works*, XII, 351.

convince both oneself and one's audience of its truth. This 'cant' was therefore emblematic of the dishonest self-deception which separated its discourse from the gusto of genuine engagement. Hazlitt respected moral or religious aspiration and sincere emotional impulse and would not condemn as hypocrisy the failure of human weakness to fulfil cherished ideals, if honestly confessed. While he condemned the false extremes of Methodist pulpit discourse and acknowledged the sect's temptation to complacency and self-importance, he could allow that Methodism supplied an outlet for sincere religious sentiment in otherwise flawed individuals: 'a modern vent for the ebullitions of the spirit through the gaps of unrighteousness'.⁸⁷ He accepted that these often thwarted impulses to moral or religious transcendence represented the struggle of the human condition:

Here, 'upon this bank and shoal of time', the utmost we can hope to attain is a strong habitual belief in the excellence of virtue, or the dispensations of Providence; and the conflict of the passions, and their occasional mastery over us, ... produce the alternate remorse and raptures of repentance and reconciliation.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge had, to differing degrees, been the unwitting vehicles for Hazlitt's earliest hopes and ideals. These ideals centred, somewhat

⁸⁷ 'On Cant and Hypocrisy', *Works*, XVII, 350

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 348-49.

vaguely, on a faith in the possibility of a social, moral and intellectual reformation through the principles of a liberal humanism that presented a political challenge to existing complacencies. The poets' failure to sustain this exalted expectation, and Hazlitt's consequent disillusionment, were perhaps inevitable. For Hazlitt, the failure consisted in what he considered Wordsworth and Coleridge's ultimate lack of the faith and courage to adhere to their earliest radical principles and apply them to their writing as a liberating vehicle for the human mind.

The reviews mentioned have been selected for closer analysis because they seem to me to reflect a persistent cultural concern with the perceived evangelical tendencies of the texts discussed, a concern registered not just by Hazlitt but also, as I have shown, by critics of the Lake poets, Francis Jeffrey and Leigh Hunt. The religious frame of reference in Hazlitt's criticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge reflects that of Jeffrey and suggests a common anxiety about the influence of religious enthusiasm. Hazlitt selected for praise in the writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge the assertive and muscular qualities identified with gusto, and was correspondingly critical of the feminised attributes, typically associated with evangelical discourse, that he felt were increasingly apparent in their later writings. These features included, stylistically, an 'effeminate' imprecision of thought and expression, ideologically, a tendency to sentimentality, and in Wordsworth, a philosophical stance of passivity.

Hazlitt's reviews of *The Excursion* emphasised the lofty abstraction of Wordsworth's philosophical enthusiasm. At the same time they noted the paradoxical 'homeliness' of the poet's domestic imagination, with its

preference for the simple and humble. These different sympathies denoted the masculine and feminine tendencies of Wordsworth's muse and a similarly reclusive preference for monastic isolation and domestic seclusion. Despite Hazlitt's sympathetic receptivity to both the grand and intimate, however, he saw in each reclusive tendency the detached self-sufficiency that was opposed to the more generous connective principle of gusto. Hazlitt's later 1827 review of Wordsworth's collected poems was to criticise what he saw as a sentimental preoccupation with 'bleating lambs and daisies' which he believed to compromise the poet's gifts and intellectual authority with the 'softness of a woman'.⁸⁹ Hazlitt was inclined to interpret human connection perhaps too determinedly in overtly masculine and political terms as public and active engagement. This indirectly discounted the quieter joy of a deeper connection with the less heroic, but equally important, familial relationships of domestic life.

Hazlitt's very different estimations of Coleridge's oral and written sermons reflected the extreme and contrasting responses which a rhetorical pulpit style typically provoked, while the degree of gusto which he positively detected in Coleridge's discourse would to some degree reflect the extent to which he identified with its political and moral perspective. Primarily, however, his evaluation of Coleridge's enthusiasm was crucially dependent on the truth it communicated and the evidence of sincerity which that supplied, irrespective of the values it endorsed. And as the transmission of truth was dependent on clarity of expression and coherence of argument, Hazlitt's increasingly focused on the communicability of Coleridge's speech and writing as the crucial

⁸⁹ Wu, *Hazlitt's New Writings*, II, 37.

signature of gusto's connectedness. Coleridge's apparent lack of intuitive connection with his subject in the rhetoric of the *Lay Sermons* was reflected in a communicative incoherence that recalled the digressive, self indulgent effusions of the popular pulpit orator and, in Hazlitt's opinion, failed to honour the rich potential of his imaginative and intellectual gifts. It also demonstrated some more profound, internal disconnection. Above all, for Hazlitt, it was fundamentally reflective of a failure of faith, a loss of the principled conviction which distinguished genuine from spurious enthusiasm and was the central activating principle both of effective expression and life itself. As Hazlitt implied in the criticism of Coleridge's written prose style, and in common with King David, much of the communicative power of the former's early pulpit address was also influenced by the perhaps deceptively seductive charisma of his physical presence and the masculine energy of gusto that had seemed to communicate. Hazlitt's increasingly critical response to Coleridge was reflected in effeminate metaphors which are sometimes ambiguously conflated with the language of the sublime more positively identified with an idealised feminine principle.

Despite the shrewd perspective of maturity, the personal and lyrical terms in which Hazlitt recollected his early inspirations and experiences echoed the cadences of a sentimental style which he generally avoided. Although he might satirise the sentimental preferences of Wordsworth's later verse, Hazlitt's descriptive language shows his own sensitive receptiveness to more delicate sentiments. Notwithstanding the eccentric 'homeliness' of Wordsworth's taste, he acknowledges the appeal of those 'touches of infinite tenderness that trouble

and melt the heart, and of delicacy that soothe and charm it'.⁹⁰ While classifying it as feminine, he can value the 'softness' of these sentiments or images. The heightened language in which Hazlitt recalled his early encounters with the poets suggest his own continuing emotional receptiveness to the innocent idealism of this formative period. It also shows how he aspired to a contentment that none of his worldly achievements could supply. This was a desire for the realisation of liberal political ideals, but also for a quieter personal fulfilment not dissimilar to the religious believer's desire for inner peace and spiritual transcendence.

⁹⁰ Wu, *New Writings*, II, 37.

Conclusion

My investigation into the relationship between eighteenth-century Methodism and nineteenth-century Romanticism has exposed in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge and the essayist Hazlitt, significant echoes of the voice of religious evangelism. I have suggested that these writers betray a possibly unconscious receptiveness to the emotional inspiration of this culture, if not its tenets. My thesis examines the problematic nature of this relationship in the cultural identification of enthusiasm with the irrationalism and excess of the 'imaginary Raptures' provoked by evangelism's 'Extraordinary Calls'.¹ I propose that the anxiety was generated by the fact that this visionary and rapturous mode of worship found its most zealous advocates amongst the uneducated classes and women. I have shown how, as a result of this association, any advocacy of enthusiastic style or sentiment was a source of embarrassment for the educated guardians of polite taste. Although Hazlitt identified with aspects of popular culture, both he and Wordsworth attempted to distance their art from a plebeian religious enthusiasm. Wordsworth achieved this by insisting on the need for the rational regulation of 'powerful feeling'; Hazlitt by emphasising the rational faculty of 'gusto' as a masculine substitute for the religious ardour associated with 'feminine' effusions.²

The figures whose work I have considered would nonetheless have subscribed to the current, positive interpretation of 'enthusiasm' offered by the

¹ See quote from Addison, Introduction, p. 12, fn. 23.

² The identification of popular revivalism with a feminine emotionalism is most fully discussed in Ch. 2, pp. 62-68.

OED which defines the word as 'passionate eagerness in any pursuit, proceeding from an intense conviction of the worthiness of the object'. For Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt and the Wesley brothers, 'passionate eagerness' was the energy which impelled an emotional and visionary apprehension of truth. This quality was felt to distinguish the poet whom Wordsworth saw as someone with 'more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness', while for John Wesley, challenging the negative connotations of enthusiasm, it expressed the 'daily growth in that pure and holy religion which the world always did and always will call 'enthusiasm'.³ In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in different contexts, Wesley and Wordsworth's dignified interpretations of 'enthusiasm' served to cleanse it of its coarser connotations while defending its passionate inspiration.

I have suggested that the historical origins of enthusiasm may be responsible for some academic reluctance to acknowledge that respected representatives of the literary canon such as Wordsworth or the shrewdly rational Hazlitt could be in any way receptive to the spirit of religious evangelism. That such figures would in themselves have denied such influences is most likely, but it does not seem reasonable to reject the idea of a perhaps subliminal receptivity to aspects of this pervasive culture, or at least the enthusiasm which it endorsed. In his discussion of the sophisticated eighteenth-century rehabilitation of enthusiasm, Irlam disputes Clement Hawes' confident assumption that enthusiasm emanates from the lower classes and is identified with women. He asserts that it would be 'a romantic fantasy to assume that that Enthusiasm is self-evidently a social energy that emanates

³ Wordsworth, 'Preface' *Lyrical Ballads* (1802 edn), p. 751; J. Wesley, 'On the Nature of Enthusiasm' *Works*, II, p. 296.

from the bottom up', rejecting the notion that one can 'tabulate a demography of sentiment according to class, race or gender'. At the same time, he acknowledges that Swift and Shaftesbury did just this in their satires of enthusiasm.⁴ I would maintain that in the discourse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a religiously inflected enthusiasm continued to be identified with both the working classes and with women, and that these associations underlay the embarrassment which the concept generated. The term enthusiasm has since been more positively appropriated and more generally and innocuously applied by all social sectors in the continuing rehabilitative process that Irlam describes. Within the context of religion, however, the concept and expression of enthusiasm still arouses concern and embarrassment in our secular culture, where it is often negatively equated with religious fundamentalism. A similar, continuing embarrassment with the connotations of enthusiasm was displayed in the way that some of the figures I have considered went on to modify their early allegiances and regulate their literary practice.

In the early decades of the nineteenth-century, a cultural reluctance to subscribe to the vulgarities of popular feeling was manifested in Wordsworth's increasing deference to Anglican orthodoxy. Although he had originally refused to satisfy those who wanted assurance that the religious morality of *The Excursion* complied with established Christian tenets, Wordsworth, by 1822, showed more overt loyalty to the Church of England as representing an institutionally authorised moral bulwark against anarchic forces.⁵ The poet's desire to conform to the early Victorian perception of him as Christian poet

⁴ Irlam, *Elations*, p. 237.

⁵ Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, pp. 396-399.

was demonstrated in his preparatory revisions for the collected edition of his works during the year of his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1843.⁶ These amendments involved an explicit Christianising of the poems' message and an attempt to formalise or clarify any vaguer mysticism. The process is demonstrated, amongst other similar revisions, in the more overtly Christian consolation with which Wordsworth replaced the earlier pantheism of 'The Ruined Cottage' in *The Excursion*:

No more would she have craved as due to One
Who, in her worst distress, had ofttimes felt
The unbounded might of prayer; and learned, with soul
Fixed on the cross, that consolation springs,
From sources deeper far than deepest pain,
For the meek Sufferer.⁷

This conformity to a more formally Anglican creed and style seems remote from the simple, urgent religious message of the field preacher which had spoken to the heart of the renegade Peter Bell.

Stephen Gill maintains that Wordsworth continued to resist an over explicit definition of his religious position, endorsing Crabb Robinson's view that 'Wordsworth is too upright a man to be guilty of any wilful deception, but perhaps he is himself not perfectly clear on the subjects on which his mode of

⁶ The respectability that Wordsworth had assumed by this stage is reflected in the accolade which accompanied the offer by the Lord Chamberlain, who said that: 'to propose this mark of distinction on an Individual whose acceptance of it would shed additional lustre on an Office in itself highly honourable' (Earl De La Warr to Wordsworth, 30 Mar. 1843. *Later Years*, IV. 97).

⁷ *The Excursion*, revisions 1836-45 (Cornell University Press), I, 75.

thinking and feeling is anxiously enquired after by his religious admirers'.⁸ The remark suggests that Wordsworth's stylistic adjustments may have been more expressive of cultural conformity than deeper conviction, and continue to indicate some receptivity towards a less formalised and personal religion of the heart.

By smoothing stylistic irregularities and attempting to erase ideological ambiguities, Wordsworth nevertheless succeeded in establishing for himself a more secure and honoured position within society that was denied less conformist spirits. In the process, he was seen by Hazlitt as having compromised the integrity of his early convictions. Wordsworth and Hazlitt differently negotiated a discourse which attempted to reconcile the sometimes conflicting imperatives of reason and feeling. Both subscribed to the wisdom of the heart, although their contrasting final reputations were to reflect divergent allegiances, Wordsworth increasingly deferring to, and Hazlitt rejecting the rational consensus of institutional authority.

As his ambivalent attitude to the vagrant had earlier demonstrated, Wordsworth remained sensitive to the danger of an extreme or isolated enthusiastic position. He mourned the loss of the early passion which had lent his surroundings a visionary radiance, 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/ Where is it now, the glory and the dream?', but was regarded by some contemporaries as having unnecessarily resigned his nobler ideals to practical expediency.⁹ His youthful passions may naturally have subsided under the social and domestic pressures imposed by mature experience, or he could be seen to have traded the isolation and possibly derided status of the visionary

⁸ *Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, I, 158.

⁹ *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 272, l. 55-56.

enthusiast for security and reputation. Hazlitt, by contrast, retained a passionate desire for a fulfilment which could never be supplied within the ideology of existing institutions, and sought liberation through a social and domestic connectedness that was finally denied him. His literary method shared some of the tendencies of Wordsworth's poetry, though they were differently balanced. In Hazlitt's writings, a shrewdly critical objectivity was modified and counteracted by an impulse to adulation that found expression in a more heightened language of sensibility and the sublime charged at times with a 'feminine' eroticism. The stance of stubborn independence inherited from his father compromised his own reputation and material security, however, and unlike Wordsworth and John Wesley, he never enjoyed the respect of a dignified old age.

Wesley's relative success in conferring respectability on Methodism was shown in the increasing respect he earned even amongst those who had initially been critical of his crude and immoderate zeal. This is demonstrated in the changing attitude reflected in the two volumes of Robert Southey's *Life of Wesley*. Southey acknowledged the younger Wesley's enthusiastic excesses; his opening description of Wesley labouring 'in the cause of religious enthusiasm' shows how he considered Methodism, certainly in the early phases of its history, to be negatively synonymous with enthusiasm.¹⁰ However, the concluding pages of the *Life* pay tribute to the founder's 'great views, great energy and great virtues'.¹¹ 'No-one who saw him, even casually, in his old age', acknowledged Southey, 'could have forgotten his venerable

¹⁰ Southey, *Life of Wesley*, I, 2.

¹¹ Ibid., II, 404.

appearance'.¹² Like Wordsworth, the older Wesley became a respected cultural icon inviting reverence from a public who felt privileged to be able to see or speak to either. Wesley's enhanced reputation owed much to his successful negotiation of the boundaries between sincere and affected enthusiasm. It involved making a careful distinction between the inspirational stimulus of a genuine zeal and false protestation. This was displayed in the precise regulatory practices he applied to the central communicative modes of the sermon and the congregational hymn. In personal terms it was demonstrated in some internal tension between the contrary impulse to rational scrutiny and receptivity to the confessional emotionalism identified with the feminine. However, the older Wesley and Wordsworth's respective modification of their positions reflected the progressive institutionalisation both of Wordsworthian Romanticism and of Methodism.

Although the elderly John Wesley had inspired respect amongst erstwhile critics, his movement continued to be associated with a potentially inflammatory 'wildness'. There were increasing efforts to tame this wilder energy within the Methodist connexion after his death, since 'the fire of the spirit played havoc with the image of decorum' which, in a conservative climate, the movement was increasingly anxious to project.¹³ An influential post-Wesleyan agent of order and decorum was Jabez Bunting (1779-1858), Secretary and later President of the Methodist Conference, whose ruthless pragmatism was an indirect comment on the potentially disruptive nature of the movement's original enthusiasm.

¹² Southey, *Life of Wesley*, II, 397.

¹³ Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 33.

Concern at this conservative reaction against the fervent genesis of Methodism encouraged independent revivalist sects such as the 'Ranters' and 'Tent' Methodists.¹⁴ From about 1816 such offshoots stimulated fresh evangelical itinerancy of the sort that might have inspired Wordsworth's use of the Methodist medium in *Peter Bell* and explained his choice of the word 'Ranters' for the worshippers in his explanatory notes to Isabella Fenwick. Wordsworth's positive, dramatic use of the open air itinerant enthusiast indicated imaginative sympathy; Primitive Methodist evangelists had certainly suffered the privations of the vagrants of Wordsworth's early poems, struggling on diets of cold cabbage and sleeping in fields and hedges.¹⁵ However, later in the nineteenth century, the primitives were increasingly marginalised within formalised Methodism which was distinguished from them by the designation 'Wesleyan Methodism', a distinction that some Methodists remain anxious to make today. A characteristic of the mainstream Methodism which developed in the nineteenth century was its increasingly respectable, bourgeois character by which it attempted to distance itself from its working class origins. Notable too was the marginalisation of women and systematic erasure of their historical contribution. All seems reflective of a persistent embarrassment with the common associations of a religiously inspired enthusiasm, and a desire to maintain a cultural distance from its excitable influence.

Each of the writers I have considered was careful to distance himself from enthusiasm wherever it was identified with falsity. Since integrity was Hazlitt's

¹⁴ See Julia Werrner's discussion in the introductory chapter of *The Primitive Methodist Connexion*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Wordsworth's personal identification with Peter Bell is shown in a remark as late as 1831 in which he confessed, 'I am as much Peter Bell as ever' (*Late Years*, II, 439).

yardstick of judgement, he was quick to condemn an inflated, self-promotional enthusiastic rhetoric in 'the spouting, oracular, didactic figure of the poet' and those 'mounting the rostrum, and delivering their opinion on fate, fortune, and the entire consummation of things'.¹⁶ In their preoccupation with form and appearance, such orators, in Hazlitt's view, displayed the 'outward flourishes and varnish of art' rather than 'the genuine touch of nature'. They were criticisms which Hazlitt applied to both Wordsworth and Coleridge's didactic and theatrical modes. Despite their communicative failures, however, both poets would have concurred theoretically with Hazlitt's contention that: 'the boundary of our sympathy is a circle which enlarges itself according to its propulsion from the centre of the heart'. As the heart is at the centre of human life and experience, so it must centrally motivate its expression. The view echoes Wesley's advocacy of the language of the heart as the language to which we must listen and which alone enables us to make a spiritual connection.¹⁷

The most intense enthusiasm has historically been lifted in song, as in the Methodist hymns of Charles Wesley, or in the heightened language of poetry, where figures and symbols may attempt to body the sublime. The deepest feeling expresses itself spontaneously, although the intellect may later shape and select. Yet all the writers I have considered would maintain that this rational crafting should succeed a pre-intellectual, intuitive conviction. Hazlitt sought to maintain the momentum of that initial, vigorous impetus in his vital language, while Wordsworth and Coleridge struggled to preserve the freshness of their original vision while mourning its transience. The touchstone was

¹⁶ 'Reason and Imagination', *Works*, XXII, 53-55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

sincerity; inspired expression had to be the language of the heart, or it was nothing. How effectively this heartfelt language was expressed and how well this faith was sustained both for Methodist evangelist and Romantic writer was another matter. Yet the genuine enthusiasm of passionate conviction remained, and remains for all advocates, an ideal which resists the cultural carapace of irony or cynicism.

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Appendix



FREDULITY, SUPERSTITION, and FANATICISM.

A MEDLEY.

We not every Spirit but try the Spirits whether they are of God: because many false Prophets are gone out into the World.
ed and Engraved by W. Hogarth. Published as the Act directs March 7. 1762.